Poetry, Politics and Culture

Essays on Indian Texts and Contexts

Akshaya Kumar

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For Madhu, Nafeesa and Tathagat

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Preface

The making of this book has its own little narrative. After my first book on the poetry of A. K. Ramanujan, I was advised by my friends and colleagues that it was time I switch over to something else—preferably writing on fiction or theory. Even my own pragmatic professional self informed me that poetry has hardly any market, and a critical book on it is the surest way to oblivion. I indeed started writing a book on literary theory after 'deconstruction'. I had done enough spade-work and had written about seventy pages as well. Suddenly, I realized that theory is at best my second choice, and that market or no-market, poetry continues to be my sole stay. I counselled myself and resolved that I cannot write a book on something I do not put my stakes on. Poetry files had to stage a comeback on my desktop.

Private passions do not necessarily translate into academic ventures. But what saw me through this predicament were my compulsive forays into poetry in various seminars straddling across issues as diverse as global terrorism, diaspora, female foeticide, morality in public life, the future of the family in India and even prison reforms. Instead of being an Arnoldian substitute for prayer, poetry has always been to me an exercise of participation in the secular domain. It is this interventionist capacity of poetry that the present book seeks to explore and espouse. The underlying endeavour is first, to retrieve poetry from the stranglehold of scriptural solemnity, and then to pitch it as an instrument of assertion, protest and participation in the arena of everyday culture. My embattled postcolonial situation demands a political reading of poetry, its appreciation in terms of its capacity to enfigure power and to negotiate history. Poetic subtlety does not obfuscate reality or postpone history; rather it brings it into prominence. Poetry, politics and culture constitute a continuum, where none precedes or supersedes the other; rather all the three co-appear as supplementary discourses, acting and countering on each other in a dialogic way.

For the purpose of precision and focus, I have relied on Indian texts and contexts that need to be explored beyond the oft-orientalized sanskritic past/poetry or much-globalized Indian English present. The book makes a critical shift towards the study of an immense variety of language-literatures (*bhasha sahitya*) that, despite the so-called

postcolonial patronage, continue to suffer relative neglect. The present endeavour confines itself to the discussion of three streams of Indian poetry—Hindi, Punjabi and Indian English. The selection of the three languages is strategic; at present all the three languages are locked in a fierce battle of supremacy in India, and as such provide a compatible frame of comparative analysis. The selection is also determined by the fact that my own competence of Indian languages does not go beyond these three. Punjabi is my mother tongue; (Indian) English is the language of my profession and as such, a la A. K. Ramanujan, the father-tongue of my cultural make-up; and Hindi (in its dialectal form) has been the language of my everyday interaction with my friends and classmates of Haryana—the place of my naturalized belonging.

What, however, prompted me to undertake a book-length project on Indian poetry was the sudden proliferation of essays written and published over the last four–five years as part of my UGC-sponsored post-doctoral major research project on comparative Indian poetry. In the present book only four of these previously published essays are incorporated; the rest have been written exclusively for the book. The first chapter of the book was published in the *South Asian Review*. The first three chapters covered in Section II of the book were published in *Indian Literature*. Permission to include these essays in the book is gratefully acknowledged. The essays published before have been sufficiently modified and updated. Though written over a period, these essays are informed by a consistent vision according to which poetry not only re-writes 'reality', it even claims postcolonial agency to transform culture and society in tangible ways.

But the most fundamental impulse that nurtured my interest in poetry and a book on it, stems from my literary parentage. My father, Dr. O. P. Gupta, a Ph.D. on Walt Whitman, not only wrote poetry in three languages—Hindi, Punjabi and English—he wrote its criticism too. In moments of stalemate, he used to provide me the necessary break. What lends special poignancy to my book is that it comes in the backdrop of his prolonged illness which incapacitates him totally. Neither does he recognize, nor speak; yet I have written this book almost in a silent dialogue with him. During the process of the book I also lost my mother, Soma Gupta, an avid reader of literary fiction. The writing of the book sustained me during these bouts of trial and attrition.

During moments of self-doubt that surfaced quite often during the process of the book, reprieve came from Narendra Kumar Oberoi, a senior colleague and friend who hates to be addressed as 'professor'. An author of an infinite number of unwritten books, his animated telephonic conversations were no less than long classical recitals that charged my sagging spirits. His indirections directed my venture in ways that are too subtle to be verbalized. My friends—Ashutosh, Anup and Rajkumar, have co-travelled with me, everywhere and anywhere. The book is as much their journey as mine. I am fortunate enough to enjoy solid family-support in my academic pursuits. My wife Madhu and children Nafeesa and Tathagat have been my emotional bank all through. At a very intimate and informal level, I feel like extending them co-authorship of the book.

My activist friends Manjit Singh, Satyapal Sehgal and Sukhdev Singh deserve to be specially mentioned. They lent me easy access to their personal collections with a sense of camaraderie that I will always cherish and find hard to reciprocate. My colleagues in language departments, research scholars and students constitute my primary constituency that provides me both a necessary boundary and an engaging perspective. The book, thus, in a way, enjoys a much 'enlarged' authorship than is suggested by my name alone as its formal author. I finally thank the entire team of Routledge India, and Dr. Nilanjan Sarkar in particular, for approving and then processing my script for publication with professional finesse.

Akshaya Kumar
Chandigarh
July 2008

Introduction

Literary space is singularly monopolized by the aesthetics of prose —both fictional and non-fictional. Despite apocalyptic deaths and re-births, the novel, theory, autobiography and essay continue to occupy centre stage, pushing poetry to the literary margins, if not into a state of irretrievable extinction.[1] Its criticism is all the more scanty and sparse. This book attempts to remove the misgivings that have often been propagated about the potentialities of poetry in negotiating with the shifting dynamics of politics, history and culture. These misgivings could be summed up as: one, poetry is illusion; two, poetry is non-dialogic; three, poetry cannot make anything happen; and four, most polemically, poetry is dead.[2] The consensus is so unrelenting that any critical re-opening of each of these final truths amounts to challenging time. Championing poetry or even defending it, that too as the very discourse of politics, history and culture, in an environment that is so utterly sceptical about its potentialities could be dismissed as a mere atavistic lapse into some defunct romanticism. Advocating its popular revival amounts to an intellectual audacity, which perhaps the present book stops short of.[3]

This book is an extended endeavour to re-view the generic merits of Indian poetry in postcolonial contexts of political agency and participation. The effort is to underline and assert the role that poetry has played along with politics, ideology and culture in shaping not just our outlook, but innermost responses as well. Poetry is neither a secondary pursuit, nor a passive reflection of the so-called primary or basic discourses of life that vary from religion to economy-driven ideology.[4] It is neither just 'an exercise of persuasion, nor mere enunciation', nor even a simple 'commemoration' of something outside it.[5] The effort is not to assert a fundamental 'superiority of poetry' over other discourses; such an extreme stance would only distance it from the praxis of life, defeating the very purpose of its production.[6] Poetry is a competing as well as a complementary discourse of participation and mediation (if not of overt alignment and commitment), and it is in this sense that its position needs to be re-assessed and re-mapped. This book maps the evolution of Indian poetry from its quasi-spiritual nationalist longings to its present-day subalternist aspirations. It is in this sense that the book is not just an academic exercise; it is an

intervention of a kind hitherto not imagined in the context of any critical study of Indian poetry as such.

Mere political poetry that borders on propaganda or sloganeering, or religious poetry that provokes originary battle cries does not explain the subtle negotiations that 'awakened poetry' in general enters into with the structures of power.[7] The interface of poetry with politics and culture is therefore multi-layered, and too intrinsic to be contained within any extended introduction. So, departing from the usual conventions, the present endeavour contains as many as three mini-introductions, each prefacing a distinct section of the book. These mini-introductions cover various facets of poetry such as its capability to imagine and re-write the home/nation along with its contesting and competing nativities and its spilling borders; its stakes in political and social activism; its implications in the processes of culture, religion and history. The introductions are deliberately short and precise, as the method of argumentation in the book is more illustrative, less theoretical. Besides this, each chapter contains its own theoretical premise and corollary that it subsequently consolidates through textual evidence.

The primary scope of the book is Indian poetry in its three 'prominent' language streams—Indian English, Hindi and Punjabi—with two minor exceptions.[8] A major part of chapter 10 in the final section pertains to the study of Marathi dalit poetry, and a Gujarati text available in Hindi translation has been used in the chapter on Meera. The time-span covered ranges from the early nationalist/colonial period to the present-day post-nationalist era. Among the Indian English poets, while the thrust of the study remains on the post-independence poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Keki Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar and Agha Shahid Ali, the poets of the late 1990s—Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Sudeep Sen, Vikram Seth, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker and others—have also been discussed in the context of the expanding frontiers of Indian English poetry as a whole. Among the Hindi poets, the range is more inclusive. Kabir and Meera have been studied in terms of their latter-day manifestations in different language literatures/translations; Bhartendu, Maithilisharan Gupt, Dinkar, Muktibodh, Nirala, Mahadevi Verma, Bharati and Dhoomil and a host of contemporary poets such as Alokdhanva, Manglesh Dabral, Leeladhar Jagudi, Rajesh Joshi, Anamika, Katyayni, Gagan Gill, Ashok Vajpeyi et al. have been studied in the context of the

ever-shifting configuration of India as a nation. Among the Punjabi poets, the 'iconic' poets of the earlier generation, namely, Amrita Pritam, 'Musafir', Shiv Kumar Batalavi and Pash have been discussed and analyzed with a number of other poets like Lal Singh 'Dil', Sant Ram Udasi, Manjit Tiwana, Shashi Samundra, Sukhvinder Amrit and others. A chapter is devoted to the study of dalit poets such as Omprakash Valmiki, Namdeo Dhasal, Gurmeet Kallarmajri and a number of dalit poets of the 1990s.

But since the study is not purely author-specific, the emphasis shifts from the poets to the poetry in general, its location and timing. More than the authors and their chosen texts, the different streams of poetry have been analyzed in terms of their stakes in the political and cultural processes of the nation. Despite the broad trajectory of the work, the so-called representative poetic texts from each of the three streams have been included for analysis and argument. The poets/texts that could not be accommodated in the main body of the chapters have been used in the Notes section to complement and buttress the arguments. In the scheme of the book, the notes at times become as good as parallel essays for they contain (counter-) comments/observations that do not otherwise fit in the running logic of the main text.

The methodology is comparative wherein each stream becomes a critical context for the other. Poetry becomes the text and the context both, suggestive of its self-reflexive, meta-critical character. Even in chapters that do not cover more than one stream of poetry, the implied methodology remains comparative and evolves as critical dialogue among the different streams of poetry. Within the overarching frame of comparative study, insights from recent cultural theories such as new historicism, subaltern historiography and postcolonialism have been deployed to understand the textual and the discursive formations of poetry. Critical theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt, Hayden White, Benedict Anderson, Bakhtin, Harold Bloom, Fredric Jameson, Partha Chatterjee, Ranjit Guha, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Ashis Nandy, Eric Hobsbawm and others have frequently been invoked to understand the operation as well as the implication of literary imagination in postcolonial power games and vice versa.

A comparative work that involves literatures in three languages entails a lot of translation. Most of the Hindi and Punjabi poets/texts included in the book have not been translated independently.

Despite the resurgence in translation of late, poetry continues to be the last choice of translators. The quotes inserted in the book have been translated for the first time by myself. These translations tend to retain the thematic and syntactic grids of the original, yet there is no such claim made about their quality. They remain of a working nature only and are at best functional translations. Some of the texts that are available in translation have, of course, been used as such, to avoid additional labour. If there is any inconsistency in the quality of translation, it is because of varying levels of linguistic competence in the three languages. The original quotes of Hindi and Punjabi poetry have not been retained. However, where it is absolutely essential, the originals appear in parenthesis in Roman script. But such instances are very rare.

Occasionally, non-poetic texts—such as plays and skits—have been used as complementary texts to extend the argument of the chapters. But most often these non-poetic texts are not so non-poetic because they contain a lot of poetry in the form of chorus, prologue/epilogue and even dialogues. These texts, often heralded as long poems, dramatic poems or poetical plays in their respective language-traditions, trudge along the fault line of poetry and prose. Texts like *Bharat Durdasha*, *Andha Yug* in Hindi, *Palang Panghure* in Punjabi and *The Golden Gate* in Indian English defy easy generic divisions and classifications.

The three sections of the book entitled 'Mapping "Nation/Post-nation"', 'Re-writing Culture' and 'Disseminating Dissent' are not mutually exclusive. The chapters contained in one section may as well belong to another without much thematic deviance. However, there is a definite trajectory covered through these sections; the first section maps out the macro-level matrices of Indian poetry, the subsequent two sections reveal the pressures of sub-/post-national imperatives and their articulation in poetry. These sections bring forth the inherent currents of re-writing and internal self-protest through which any dynamic postcolonial nation renews and revalidates itself. Far from the discourse of facile resolution and esoteric abstractions, Indian poetry, as each section unfolds, gravitates towards the articulation of the silenced subaltern. Each section is so structured that it includes as far as possible at least a chapter/text each on all the three streams of Indian poetry covered in the book.

Finally, a word needs to be spoken about the evolution of the book to account for the possible discontinuities and gaps in its execution.

The book as such is not a one-time event, for four essays (the details are provided in the Preface) collected here are written on different occasions and at various intervals of time. Of course, even these essays appear in the book in their revised and updated form. Written over the last four years, these essays may not ideally be taken as organic 'chapters' of a book, yet they are the building blocks of a sustained critical endeavour that seeks to assign political participation and agency to poetry, hitherto allowed little interventionist role in our practical life. Also, there are many poets and texts that could not be incorporated in the over-all scheme of the book. Since the book does not survey different streams of poetry with any encyclopaedic intention, such exclusions could not be helped. An imbalance in the book creeps in on account of the limited language-streams covered in it. Of the three Indian languages included for study in the book, two are predominantly North Indian, which in itself is a limiting factor. For lack of competence in Urdu, even the book's North Indian character could not be fully realized. Ghalib, Iqbal, Faiz, Ali Sardar Jafari, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Kaifi Azmi and other Urdu poets are of course available in multiple translations but their translated versions failed to register in the mind as such.

Notes

1. The novel stages comebacks after its so-called exhaustions. Steiner, commenting on the post-Joycean phase of the English/European novel made this pronouncement: 'We are getting tired of our novels . . . genres rise, genres fall, the epic, the verse epic, the formal verse tragedy. Great moments, then they ebb. Novels will continue to be written for quite a while but increasingly, the search is on for hybrid forms, what we will call rather crassly fact/fiction. . . . What novel can today quite compete with the very best of immediate narrative?' (quoted in Rushdie 2002: 54). Countering such 'imperial views', Rushdie defends the novel in the postcolonial context: 'a new novel is emerging, a post-colonial novel, a de-centred, transnational, inter-lingual, cross-cultural novel; and that in this new world order or disorder, we find a better explanation of the contemporary novel's health' (ibid.: 57). After a temporary eclipse, literary theory staged a comeback in the mid-1980s. At least in the metropolitan academia of the First World, theory has overtaken literature/creative writing. The following quote from Quentin Skinner's edited book *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* explains theory's resurgence despite resistance from some quarters: 'We, next need to note that, during the past two decades, there has been an unashamed return to the deliberate construction of precisely those grand theories of human

nature and conduct which Wright Mills and his generation had hoped to outlaw from any central place in the human sciences' (Skinner 2000: 13). The autobiography has also staged a remarkable comeback. Now, instead of the elite, it becomes an instrument of assertion and self-presentation in the hands of the subaltern. A series of autobiographies by dalits and women has displaced literary preferences. Many fiction writers herald the arrival of non-fiction as the emerging form of the post-9/11 phase of history. V. S. Naipaul, in an interview, declares that non-fiction is more powerful than fiction and that the novel is dead as it is incompetent to take up pressing civilizational problems. He says, 'And the fictional form was going to force you to do things with the material, to dramatize it in a certain way. I thought non-fiction gave one a chance to explore the world, the other world, the world that one didn't know fully' (quoted in Donadio 2005).

2. Plato's distrust with regard to the very veracity of poetry, argued so eloquently in his *The Republic*, is evident in the following excerpt from the book: 'the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small—he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth' (Book X, see http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic). Bakhtin, the proponent of dialogism, also holds that poetry, as a genre, is 'authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative sealing itself off from the influence of extraliterary social dialects' (1998: 287). Ironically enough, the poets themselves have expressed reservations about the capacities of poetry. According to A. K. Ramanujan, 'Poems aren't even words/enough to rankle, infect,/or make smallest incisions' ('Any Cow's Horn Can Do It', 1995: 94). Jayanta Mahapatra also questions the convictions of a poet:

> This is a man who talks of pain
> as though it belonged to him alone.
> Maybe he has invented it himself
> and made a virtue of it.
> Maybe he is a poet.
> ('Of a Questionable Conviction', 1992: 36.)

   Adorno makes the infamous apocalyptic pronouncement in the wake of the Holocaust: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which pre-supposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb mind entirely' (1981: 210).

3. In an essay published in *The Hudson Review* (2003), Dana Gioia, argues in favour of poetry's comeback in the new electronic age: 'verse has changed into a growth industry, though its rehabilitation has happened mostly off the printed page.' However, in the very next line, there is some scepticism about its quality: 'Whatever one thinks of the artistic quality of these new poetic

forms, one must concede that at the very least they reassuringly demonstrate the abiding human need for poetry' (ibid.: 25).

4. Here, the views of culture critics like Raymond Williams are very useful as they bring dynamism into the orthodox dialectical hierarchy of 'base versus superstructure'. Instead of 'reflection', his preferred paradigm is that of 'mediation' between the two: 'The simplest notions of a superstructure, which is still by no means entirely abandoned, had been the reflection, the imitation or the reproduction of the reality of the base in the superstructure in a more or less direct way . . . the modern notion of "mediation", in which something more than simple reflection or reproduction—actively occurs' (2001: 163–64).
5. Suvir Kaul, in his book *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*, while maintaining that poetry is not 'an exercise of inwardness' (2000: 8), however, confines eighteenth-century British poetry to mere exercises in persuasion and enunciation: 'the important work performed by the eighteenth-century poems we have considered here, their persuasive dynamic, is their enunciation of both the energetic possibilities, and the limiting realities of the idea of a great and imperial nation' (ibid.: 272). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, while studying a poem by Paul Celan observes: 'the poem commemorates. Its experience is an experience of memory' (1999: 21).
6. Under the rubric of New Criticism, poetic truth was accorded greater sanctity and authenticity over any other form of truth.
7. Namvar Singh's observation on the 'awakened poet' in this regard is clinching: 'The awakened poet during the process of his poetic-act, keeps on defining the political contexts in a very cautious manner and thus while avoiding to write directly on political issues, gives every creative piece a definite political meaning' (Kavita aur Rajniti 2003: 216).
8. The three languages are prominent in the sense that English continues to be the language of metropolitan India, Hindi is officially the national language and is spoken by the vast majority of Indians, Punjabi is one of the major North Indian languages which is becoming global due to the widespread Punjabi diaspora.

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Section 1
Mapping ‘Nation’/‘Post-nation’

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Section 1: Introduction

What could be the genre of the 'nation' in the emerging scenario of displacement from within and without? If displacement, as is fiercely argued, is a space of negotiation and exchange, its genre should also be as much negotiated. But before the question is ever raised, it is settled in favour of fiction without much critical debate. In a sweeping critical estimate, we are told that fiction not only actually participates in the mapping of the nation; it continues to be its allegory/narrative even in the era of multinationalism/multiculturalism.[1] Thus, very conveniently and without much critical contestation, fiction becomes the genre of the home and homelessness as well. It is presumed that poetry is a discourse of un-negotiated rootedness and centripetal belonging. The implied distrust on poetry stems from two a priori notions—one, that poetry is hardly a discourse of negotiation and exchange that any multicultural situation entails, and two, that poetry is more a discourse of a cohesive and rooted vertical self, than of the horizontally proliferating selves. The spatial strengths of poetry have always been ignored in favour of its temporal depth.

Poetry is not a one-time invention/event that is complete and conclusive; it undergoes revisions and mutations as any other secular genre does. The ever-expanding corpus of Indian diaspora poetry—more so in native tongues than perhaps in Indian English—offers a range of responses to the condition of displacement right from a nostalgic invocation of a ghettoized self in the embattled multicultural situation to its intelligent negotiation. Within the new space of this poetry, cultures do meet, quarrel and negotiate with varying degrees of accommodation and assimilation. From a discourse of roots, it becomes a discourse of routes, of shifting destinations, of changing locations, and of many homes. Nation, post-nation and nativity—the possible addresses of the self-in-exile—enrich the texture of Indian diaspora poetry in ways that are unprecedented. Amitav Ghosh identifies 'epic without text' as the new genre of Indian diaspora.[2]

The first chapter of the section deals with the stakes that Hindi poetry has evinced in the making of India as a nation-state through a detailed textual analysis of eight seminal texts pertaining to the pre- and postcolonial period. Since the rise of Khari Boli as a medium of mainstream Hindi literary medium parallels the evolution of the Indian freedom struggle, the study of Hindi poetry as the preferred

genre of Hindi writers has the potentiality to offer us a non-political perspective on the mapping of the nation-centric imagination of the people of the dominant Hindi heartland. The poets covered are Bhartendu, Maithilisharan Gupt, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Dinkar, Dharamveer Bharati, Muktibodh and Dhoomil. Most of these poets were in the vanguard of the Indian freedom struggle and post-independence social movements. While Gupt and Dinkar were hailed as national poets/poet-laureates (*rashtra kavi*s), Bhartendu was a frontline Indian reformer during the nineteenth century; Nirala often had his encounters with the nationalist elite from Gandhi to Nehru. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan actually took part in the freedom struggle as a Gandhian *satyagrahi*. The participation of the poets in political meetings/programmes/rallies suggests that there was never a wedge between the political and the poetical.

If, in the pre-independence period, the modern statist imperatives collided and colluded with the traditional cultural nationalist moorings of Hindi imagination, in the post-independence period the post-statist aspects begin to surface and threaten any process of the consolidation of the state along elitist lines. The nature of binaries changes radically. In fact, the binaries fracture further into multi-directional fragments, generating a hybridity whose structure is no longer bicultural or bipolar. The erstwhile cultural encounter of the East versus the West or the colonized versus the colonial gives way to an ideological encounter of the elite versus the subaltern or capitalism versus socialism. The process of making the nation-state turns self-critical as Hindi poets take a society-centric approach. The opening of the political discourse from statist to society-centric paradigms in post-independence India is very much anticipated by the evolving Hindi poetic imagination.

The second chapter, a natural extension of the first, explores the configuration of home/homelessness in the Hindi poetry of the post-1990s—a period which has brought about fundamental changes in the course of human civilization. Most of the poets covered in the chapter happen to be *janvadi*s, who, while protesting against the oppressive nature of the nation-state, are strongly sceptical about the liberating potentials of globalization. Much against the growing political consensus on the politics of privatization, poets like Leeladhar Jagudi, Alokdhanva, Rajesh Joshi, Arun Kamal, Manglesh Dabral, Prayag Shukla and Katyayni offer a sustained poetical protest that reveals its essentially counter-hegemonic character. Hindi poetry of

this period steps out of the cultural nationalist hangovers as it clamours for a people-centric voice. The possessive centripetal tendencies do not give way to radical centrifugal ones, but the sense of displacement from within does generate possibilities of negotiated and critical belonging in the Hindi poetry of the post-1990s.

In the next chapter—entitled 'From Hyphen to High-fun: Towards a Topology of New Indian English Diaspora Poetry'—the cultural dynamics of the post-independence Indian diaspora have been mapped in terms of its shifting topologies of space and time. As the new diaspora gains greater mobility across cultures and civilizations, it becomes increasingly 'rootless' which it celebrates with the convictions of a postmodern nomad. The Indian English poets, of the post-1990s in particular, are at home in the global arena as they defy postcolonial identitarian politics in favour of a new, though seemingly, 'wishful' identity of global citizens. The chapter undertakes a close textual study of the poetry of Dom Moraes, A. K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali in terms of their distinct strategies of negotiation within the space of diaspora. The major part of the chapter is, however, devoted to the new breed of young poets such as Vikram Seth, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi, Sudeep Sen, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Jeet Thayil et al. Due to constraints of space, only one anthology each of these poets has been focused upon for analysis.

The latter generation among the new diaspora poets actually seems to arrive at a post-diasporic state of consciousness wherein the binary between the native and diasporic no longer remains functional. The universality that these poets aim at is not the metaphysical unity/objectivity of the erstwhile epic poetry; it is rather 'a play of perspectives' or a discourse of 'epistemic cooperation'.[3] These post-diasporic poets evince some common characteristics that lend their poetry a radical distinctness. One, these poets clamour for a pre-lapsarian, pre-political past which militates against the division of humanity into parochial nationalist boundaries. Two, these poets do not evince centripetal tendencies; the erstwhile nostalgia for the homeland gives way to a ready recognition of the post-national, multicultural world order. The range and scope of inter-textuality becomes manifold, so much so that almost without exception these poets are compelled to give extended notes on the cross-cultural references they use in their poems.

Notes

1. In his *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha rallies around the novel as the possible narrative of postcolonial 'ambivalences', 'temporalities', 'ruptures' both from within and without. Though he avoids zeroing in on a specific genre, yet the characteristic features of 'double time', 'transactional social reality', 'instability of knowledge', 'liminality' (1990: Introduction) etc., which he identifies for his kind of hybrid postcolonialism befit very much the realist fiction theorized by Lukacs, Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Benedict Anderson, and others. Though Fredric Jameson uses the term 'Third World literature' as the allegorical site of Third World nationalism, yet for purposes of illustration he too depends on fiction. For Jameson, Third World literature becomes 'national allegory' when it 'develops out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel' (2000a: 69).
2. 'The links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination. It is therefore an epic relationship: an epic without a text, which is all for the better perhaps, for if that text were ever written it would be a shabby, bedraggled, melancholy kind of epic—but still formally, an epic it would have to be. It is because this relationship is so much a relationship of the imagination that the specialists of the imaginations—writers—play so important a part within it' (Ghosh 2002b: 247–48).
3. R. Radhakrishnan describes the dynamics of new configurations of universality and objectivity in the multicultural context: 'universality has given way to radically heterogeneous locations and subject positions that refuse implication in relational macro-narratives. . . . The ontological status of objectivity is reconceptualized as an epistemological property of perspectives, which in turn are mandated to look for objectivity as a function of their never-ending negotiations among themselves' (2003: 36–38). Satya P. Mohanty spells out the contours of 'epistemic cooperation' in the emerging multicultural context thus: 'Difference and individuality are not opposed to a deeper communality, a community of purpose. Even in a world that is not fundamentally structured by (cultural) inequality, healthy pluralism is more likely than cultural homogeneity to lead to the fruitful coordination of our epistemic efforts. That is, I believe, the strongest argument that can be made for multiculturalism, and it is based not on moral or cultural relativism but rather on a realist account of the cognitive component of cultural practice and the objectivity of value' (1998: 247).

1

Negotiating Nationalism(s): Hindi Poetry During and After the Colonial Period

The evolution of modern Hindi as a medium of poetic expression from Khari Boli and other North Indian dialects provides a 'reliable' concurrent cultural frame to the dynamics of the politico-historical restructuring of India from the so-called Hegelian 'stateless society' into a modern nation-state during the colonial period and after.[1] This chapter maps out India's struggle to define itself as a nation-state through its poetry written in Hindi, its most dominant indigenous language. Instead of presenting an evolutionary account of the state-consciousness of Hindi poetry through a survey of a plethora of texts dwelling on the play of nationalism(s) during the colonial period and after, the present endeavour is limited to the study of some chosen texts that mark decisive shifts in the Hindi imagination of the nation.[2] The effort in this chapter is to contain and build the argument through only these texts. Each text is a site of multiple voices—conflicting as well as complementary—revealing the underlying tensions and anxieties of defining India as a nation-state.

The four poetic texts undertaken for re-historicizing India's struggle to nationhood during the colonial period include Bhartendu Harishchandra's *Bharat Durdasha* (1951a [1880]), Maithilisharan Gupt's *Bharat Bharati* (1989 [1912]), Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's 'Jhansi ki Rani' (1930, see www.manaskriti.com/kaavyaalaya/jhansi) and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's 'Ram ki Shakti Pooja' (1988a [1936]).[3] The period after independence has also been remapped through four seminal texts—Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's *Rashmirathi* (1960 [1952]), Dharamveer Bharati's *Andha Yug* (2005 [1953]), Muktibodh's 'Andhere Mein' (1991 [1964]) and Dhoomil's 'Mochiram' (1980 [1972]). The texts are either long poems or poetic plays—the two forms that suited most of the poetics of transition that India as a cultural space was undergoing during and after the colonial period. Both forms (d)evolve from the non-negotiable as well as trans-historicized

genre of the grand epic.[4] The imperatives of politics, existence and temporality collide and collude with those of religion, spiritualism and nationalism to yield long poetic narratives that re-write culture in ways never plainly linear or transcendental.

Each text mentioned here has its unique cultural context and a 'nationist' configuration, mapping a distinct stage in India's rather bumpy journey into statehood. Each one is evaluated primarily at three levels that are crucial to the understanding of the nation-centric imagination of the poet/poem concerned. The first level pertains to the particular variety of Hindi—dialectal, sanskritic, Hindustani or secular—that is employed in the poetic articulation. The second level pertains to the atlas of India that each text draws in terms of its geographical coordinates**.** Finally, each text is studied not only in terms of its allegorical (pre)tensions but also in terms of its interventionist capacities in the making of the nation.

I

Bhartendu's *Bharat Durdasha*, as a post-1857 poetic-play, is significant for its nationalist overtures as it dramatizes the destiny of Bharat as its protagonist.[5] As the growing Indian middle class clamours for a sustained form of nation-making (as against the localized, sporadic and non-official native nationalisms of pre-1857) either through the imitation of the modular forms of nationalism or through the audacious invocation of defunct sanskritic nationalism, Bhartendu's Bharat struggles for emancipation in the bewildering medley of nationalist discourses.[6] Before the configuration of the play of various nationalisms in the poetical-skit is worked out, it is pertinent to give more than a passing glance to its linguistic composition because language has always been one of the major sites of competing nationalisms. The invention of a national language is inevitably interlinked with any aspiration of modern nationhood.

In terms of its linguistic make-up, the skit incorporates different language registers that were at play in the latter half of the nineteenth century in northern India. While the songs in the skit have been conceived in the native dialects of Brij and Avadhi, the dialogues are largely in Khari Boli with a liberal sprinkling of Urdu and Sanskrit words with quotes in-between.[7] What makes this 'code-mixing' intriguing is Bhartendu's own strong advocacy of a standardized Hindi as an official national language.[8] Why should the poet-playwright then

succumb to the non-official vernacular and Sanskrit-centred linguistic registers? Is it a sign of the confusion from which the new Indian elite suffered due to a lack of clarity of nationalist ideals/frames? Or is it a sign of the poet-playwright's mature negotiation with the pressures of print, oral and classical nationalisms?[9] Either way, the skit falls short of inaugurating in the domain of Hindi literature a formal Hindi-specific nationalism; it is more Hindustani than Hindi. Bhartendu, hitherto credited with the invention of Hindi nationalism, does not evince any such exclusive inventiveness in *Bharat Durdasha*.[10]

Does the heteroglossia of speech empower the protagonist of the skit? If the tragic ending of the skit is any indication, it proves to be utterly suicidal as it hardly lends stability to the character of Bharat. The linguistic confusion is symptomatic of a larger cultural confusion that India as a nation was undergoing in the 1880s—the incipient decade of its modernist nationalist struggle. Various forms of linguistic nationalisms—official, popular/native and sanskritic—collide and appear with their inherent contradictions, but the catastrophic ending suggests no easy resolution of the cultural confusion that early nationalists faced in imagining India. The poet-playwright is caught in a cultural quandary—whether to press for India's sanskritic past, or to petition for its institutional consolidation under the Raj tutelage, or even to forge a working everyday nationalism. The ideals of sanskritic nationalism, the imperatives of modern-day nationhood, and the 'assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist' (Hobsbawm 1990: 10), constitute the three-pronged dimension of Hindi nationalism during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Sanskritic nationalism is cherished and derided in the same breath. In the prologue itself, there is a vehement nationalist assertion that proclaims India's Vedic past as originary and absolute: [11]

> Where god bequeathed richness and power first
> where civilization descended long ago
> where a sense for aesthetics came first
> where knowledge dawned first . . . (1951a: 469)

This is indeed an audacious act of mimicry and self-glorification. Before this brand of backward-looking nationalism becomes loud and celebratory, a strong sense of its critique sets in and the abstract notions of nation propagated through the high principles of *advait* invite sharp criticism from within:

> Maharaj Vedant did a great service. Every Hindu became a Brahma. None had a sense of duty. After having acquired knowledge, each one turned away from god, each became too conceited that there was no room for emotions. And when there are no emotions, where is the motivation for national emancipation? Only jai shankar ki! (ibid.: 475)

Keeping in view the high-pitched attempts of the reformers of the pre- and post-1857 period, from Rammohun Roy to Vivekananda, towards the revival of upnishadic ideals of Hinduism, Bhartendu's spoof of Maharaj Vedant is bold and daring. Bhartendu goes on to catalogue a series of brahmanical practices that have ruined India as a civilization. The *satyanash fauj*—the army of destruction—stages a spectacle through which it parades its achievements in undoing nationalist India thus:

> Created many castes, invented hierarchies of low and high . . .
> Did not allow marriage without horoscope
> Marriage during childhood, destroyed scope for adult romance . . .
> prohibited widow-remarriage, which only promoted adultery
> prohibited going abroad, encouraged narrow-mindedness (ibid.)

The politics of revivalism runs into the politics of reform, forcing a revision of stance. Bhartendu's protagonist Bharat, desperate as he is, swings from one extreme to another to come out of his stupor. Unlike fundamental nationalists, Bhartendu's Bharat has no reservations about clinging on to British-sponsored nationalism, provided it redeems him from his present state of wilderness.

The official nationalism as an alternative to sanskritic nationalism and as propagated by the Raj also receives both approval and disapproval. Bharat pleads for the benign intervention of the British Queen, addressed in the poem in divine terms as 'Bhagavti Raj Rajeshveri', to facilitate his rescue. The last speech by Bharatbhagya is virtually a salutary acceptance of the Raj:

> See the sun of education rises from the West. It is not the time to sleep. If you don't wake in this raj, when shall you redeem yourself! . . . The education has spread far and wide. Every one gets a right to speech and representation. New knowledge and technology comes from abroad. . . . Hey divine Imperial Queen hold my hand and redeem us! (ibid.: 496)

The colonial rule is hailed (if not cherished), but the fact that it diverts Indian capital to Great Britain pains the poet-playwright: 'The English rule does bring a lot of comfort/but what sours most is the drain of our money abroad' (ibid.: 470).

Thus, both types of nationalisms, indigenous and colonial, fail to revive the unconscious Bharat. Any other type of nationalism is not explored as much in the skit; however, Bhartendu's use of mixed language does suggest the possibility of an alternative working nationalism, which is fairly composite, if not assimilative, in character and scope. Bharatbhagya's suicide has more to do with his failure to tap this innate popular everyday nationalism rather than the inadequacies of other types of overarching nationalisms. Caught in the easy orientalist binaries of East versus West, Bharat fails to carve the in-between space between the modular and the sanskritic, despite Bhartendu's use of what Vasudha Dalmia terms 'the third idiom'.[12] Bharatbhagya's dramatic suicide only suggests the limitations of a much-theorized two-edged/ambivalent postcolonial nationalism of resistance and collaboration.[13]

II

As nationalistic discourse comes out of its supplication mould, the fundamental dichotomy between the cherished stateless glorious past and the mandatory statist future continues to beleaguer the Hindi imagination.[14] While celebrating India's civilizational past, Maithilisharan Gupt, in his *Bharat Bharati* (1989 [1912]), laments its de-cultured present.[15] The poet, very much like Bhartendu, seeks the Raj's intervention in ameliorating the civic condition of the people; yet both in intent and diction, the tilt is towards cultural nationalism.[16] The long poem, divided into three sections and written in a series of quatrains, 'Ateet Khand', 'Vartman Khand' and 'Bhavishyat Khand', lays down not only the futuristic blueprint of India along the lines of the modern West, but also celebrates its cultured past in a language that is overtly sanskritic, scriptural and sermonizing. The diction tends to be cumbersome and 'clumsy' (Rosenstein 2002: 4); the Urdu–Khari Boli mix later described by Gandhi and other nationalists as Hindustani, is abandoned in favour of a chaste and pure classical idiom. The effort is to approximate Vedic Sanskrit at least in diction and style. The poem opens with a conventional epic invocation:

manas-bhavan mein aryajan jiski utarein aarti—
bhagwan! bharatvarsha mein goonje hamari bharati .
ho bhadrabhavodbhavani vah bharati he bhagvate!
sitapate! sitapate! geetamate! geetamate!! (1989: 1)

(in the edifice of humanity that Aryans worship—
O god! let our prayer echo throughout India
Let gentle emotions come forth from the goddess of knowledge!
Sita's lord! Sita's lord! Mother-Geeta! Mother-Geeta!!)

The deployment of high-sounding multi-syllabic compounds and hyphenated words (*manas-bhavan*, *bhadrabhavodbhavani*) along with their distorted native forms (*bhagvate*, *sitapate*) points towards the inherent poetic/political compulsion of forging a classical image of native India. Throughout the poem, the poet strives to literally plant tedious sanskritic vocabulary into his otherwise prosaic poetic enterprise. The process of what may be termed as the Hinduization of Hindi begins with full gusto in the Dwivedi period.

In terms of its cartographic horizons, Gupt's *Bharat Bharati* orbits around the holy and sacred landmarks of the Hindi heartland. India is rather confined into a narrow sacred strip of landmass between the Himalayas and the Ganges, with hardly any reference to its eastern and southern regions and seacoasts: 'pride of earthly-world, where else is nature's sacred play-ground?/There it is, spread around splendid Himalayas and the water of Ganges' (ibid.: 4). Barring a passing reference to Shivaji's Maharashtra or Rana Pratap's Mewar**,** the location of the poem does not go beyond the Hindu *rashtra*, which in the words of the poet is 'rishi-bhoomi' (the land of seers). Namvar Singh's observation is no different: 'But in *Bharat Bharati*, there is no place for the south of India. The glorious image of the past that the poet draws has room neither for Madurai-Meenakshi nor for Thyagaraj. *Bharat Bharati*'s Hindu in the end remains confined to a region from Ganga to Doab' (2003: 364).

At times, Gupt rarefies his Hindu India so much that its definite geographical co-ordinates are almost entirely lost in the process; heralding India to be the mother-civilization, the poet contends: 'Even in America, tangible signs of our presence are found' (1989: 21) and also 'Japan was a disciple of old *Bharatvarsha*' (ibid.: 23). Even Greeks, as the poet claims, gained knowledge only after accepting Hindus as their gurus (ibid.: 22). India becomes the epicentre of enlightenment:

> Had we not seized darkness, not invented new things perennially
> The light that travelled from our east, couldn't have reached west,
> Even nature stands witness to the fact that till today everywhere
> The sun rises in the east, and not in the west. (ibid.: 25)

The homologous relationship that the poet establishes between the sun and India only underlines the overarching, non-cartographic nature of poetic imagination.

After having sung ancient India's golden glory in almost quasi-*mantric* terms, Gupt's *Bharat Bharati* descends to prosaic poetry marred by reformatory rhetoric. According to Orsini, if one were to take out rhyme from the 'Vartman Khand', it could as well be taken as 'one of the many articles on *Bharat Durdasha* coming straight from Dvivedi's pen' (2002: 201). In this section, the poet criticizes contemporary India for its cultural amnesia:

> What we have become from what we were, is simply forgotten
> Tell me, who really bothers about our esteem
> We don't know as to who our ancestors were,
> Quite a burden it is to offer in their name even handful of water. (1989: 145)

The tendencies of revivalism compete with the emergent discourse of reformism in a highly arbitrary manner. In the 'Bhavishyat Khand', instead of holding on to the glory of the ancient golden past as the possible plank of India's future recuperation, the poet switches over to the modular paradigms of nation-making of the West. The urge to establish Hindi formally as a national language is one clear instance of mimetic nationalism:

> There is no national language in this country as yet
> to make our ideas known to each other.
> Hindi is worth it, yet it has not received that status.
> Without language there cannot be emotional unity. (ibid.: 175)

The prosaic expression suggests the blandness of nationalist imagination during the 1920s. The swing from proto-nationalism to modern statism is charted out without a convincing poetics of transition and negotiation. Partha Chatterjee explains this kind of swing in terms of his theory of 'two domains'—the 'outer' material and the 'inner' spiritual—as unique to Indian nationalism during the colonial

period.[17] However, the fact remains that such a formulaic nationalism lends quite a paradoxical and even opportunistic character to Indian nationalism as a whole.

III

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's 'Jhansi ki Rani' (1930, see www.manaskriti.com/kaavyaalaya/jhansi) provides an example of patriotic poetry written during the Gandhian period of the freedom struggle for an understanding of what may be termed as the 'nationalist-feminist' perspective. Not only is the poet a woman, the subject matter of the poem is also the phenomenal bravery of a woman. How does the nation account for women in its making? Are women subsumed within the predominantly masculine discourse of cultural nationalism or are they allowed to participate in the enterprise of nationalism in their distinct ways? The questions assume special significance as Chauhan is an associate of Gandhi and a freedom fighter herself.[18]

In terms of its tone and tenor, Chauhan's poem is not very different from the mainstream (male) nationalist poetry of the Dwivedi period. Neither the female subject, nor the female authorship makes much difference to the poetics of nationalist poetry. The language of nationalism continues to be sanskritized Hindi as is evident from the high-sounding beginning: '*sinhasan hil uthe, rajvanshon ne bhrikuti taani thi*' (ibid.) ('the thrones were shaken, and the royal dynasties raised their eyebrows'). The belligerence is phallocentric, too: '*chamak utthi sun sattavan mein vah talwar purani thi*' (ibid.) ('the sword that blazed in the year 57 was old'). However, the reformatory self-critical streak of the early nationalists gives way to combative nationalism.

The absence of reformatory rhetoric reduces the poem to a purely retrogressive nationalist ballad allowing Chauhan to engender rare lyricism in its texture.[19] The poet, therefore, manages better acoustics than her prosaic predecessors could ever do; the classical idiom is combined deftly with native refrains and rhythms:

> *Bundele harbolon ke mukh se hamne sooni kahani thi*
> *Khoob ladi mardani vo to Jhansi wali rani thi . . .*
>
> From the mouth of Bundels and Harboles, we heard a story
> Like a man gallantly she fought, such was the queen of Jhansi . . .
> (ibid.)

The female folk sensibility (as opposed to the urbanized male sensibility) comes into play in such immensely oral refrains. The conflation of two registers suggests the relationship of a possible exchange between the *desi* and the classical, between the subaltern and the national.

The local heroine is raised to the level of a national icon; the oral nationalism combines with the printed one. Instead of going back to the prehistoric or proto-historic mythical narratives to assert the indigenous basis of nationalism, Chauhan chooses to dwell upon a woman protagonist from the not-so-remote past. But the historicity of the poetic narrative is soon lost or sufficiently compromised as the propensity to deify Rani overtakes the poet in moments of nationalist assertion. Rani is projected as a Hindu warrior-goddess:

> Lakshmi or Durga, she was in her own right, an avatar of bravery
> Marathas felt elated looking at her fencing skills
> Breaking through mock military stratagems, hunting,
> Encircling armies and destroying forts, were her favourite sports (ibid.)

Rani's bravery is transformed into masculine valour. In the process, she is denied her ordinary female aspirations: 'you were just twenty-three, you were not human being, but the very incarnation of the divine' (ibid.).

The poem does take its woman protagonist out of the inner and insular corset of the home, but it takes her straight to the battlefield. The engagement of the woman protagonist with the intermediate world of intelligent negotiation between the home and the battlefield goes without representation, implying thereby, that the choice is either to be a docile faithful queen or a warrior-woman who can match and even outdo male warriors. Both heroism and domesticity demand sacrifice and self-denial, and thus deprive the women their participation in mundane state affairs hitherto reserved for males. In this sense, both home and battlefield complement each other in excluding the women from the political processes of nation-making.

Chauhan's nationalism, instead of offering a female counter-perspective, ends up in the assertion of adult male militaristic values. The subaltern does not speak at all. Rani's best friends in her tender years were not dolls and toys but 'spear, shield, sword, dagger' (ibid.). The aged India regains its virile youthfulness in 1857: '*budhe bharat mein bhi aayi phir se nayi jawani thi*' (ibid.) ('ageing India regained

its youth all over again'). In the context of the poem, the issues of gender and age combine to yield a paradigm of masculine nationalism that has little room for its women. The duality between nationalism and statism that hounds the poets of the Dwivedi period does not bother Subhadra Kumari Chauhan as much.

IV

By the time Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' descends on the poetical scene, Hindi nationalism seems to attain a rare degree of self-reflexivity. It begins to re-write its own cherished nationalist idols in terms of their vulnerabilities and moments of self-doubt.[20] As the challenges of inventing a secular nationalism within the *topos* of tradition begin to nag the nationalist elite of the late 1930s, it revisits mythical narratives and the archetypal frames of cultural nationalism with humanist pretensions. Although Nirala chooses overtly mainstream Hindu co-relatives to articulate his vision of struggle for freedom, personal as well as national, yet his attitude towards them is reflective and critical.[21] As Hindu myths, metaphysics and morality undergo a process of critical re-visioning from within, the process of the humanization of the iconic and the sacred begins to take place. The mythical and the humanist begin to impinge upon each other in ways that mark the promise of sufficiently moderate, if not fully secularized, versions of nationalism.

Nirala's 'Ram ki Shakti Pooja' (1988a [1936]) can be heralded as an allegory of self-reflexive Indian nationalism in which the poet seeks to re-invent *shakti*, the power of the self, afresh (*shakti ki karo maulik kalpana*) in its fight against the formidable Empire. In terms of its linguistic portfolio, the poem begins in sanskritized Hindi (*tatsam*) before it lapses towards the end into the ordinary standard lexicon. The change in the nature of diction mirror-images the floundering morale of Ram in his battle with his arch rival Ravana. Right at the outset, the poem attempts very ambitious structures, containing a series of *samasa*s (compound words), forgoing the employment of verbs:

> *pratipal-privartit-vyooh, bhed-kaushal-smooh,*
> *vicchuritvahni-rajeevnayan-hut-lakshay-baan*
> *lohitlochan-ravan-madmochan-mahiyaan* . . . (1988: 97–98)
>
> (changing every moment the stratagem, skill-secrecy combine
> going astray the arrows of fire-filled lotus-eyes.
> Blood-shot eyes of Ravana, frenzied on high trip . . .)

The poet changes linguistic registers when it comes to conveying the final message without any make-up, to admit:

> *dhik jeevan ko jo pata hi aaya virodh!*
> *dhik sadhan jiske liye sada hi kiya sodh!* (ibid.: 106)
>
> (O how cursed is this life that always found opposition!
> cursed are the means which were always researched!)

The descent from elevated lofty beginning to down-to-earth denouement points towards the limits of sublime sanskritic nationalism.

The poet employs the central Hindu trope of Rama versus Ravana to underline the enormity of the colonial combat, but unlike the traditional stereotypes, he infuses a rare streak of humanism in his characters. The episode re-explored in the poem does not belong to Tulsi's *Ramcharitmanas*; rather it is lifted from the Bangla *Ramayana* written by Krittbas. Such a deviation from the mainstream suggests the anxiety of the nationalist elite to look beyond the popular narratives of the Hindi heartland to understand the dynamics of a colonized nation. The episode pertains to the invocation of *Shakti* by Rama who is otherwise doubtful of defeating Ravana. To please the goddess *Shakti*, Rama prepares to offer a certain number of lotus flowers to her, some of which disappear; this reminds Rama of his *kamalnayan* (lotus-eyes). As he prepares to pluck out one eye to complete the required number of lotus flowers, the goddess is pleased and prevents his hand from performing the supreme sacrifice.

In the poem, Rama is portrayed as an extremely tentative warrior who is uncertain about the outcome of his battle with Ravana:

> Stable Rama is repeatedly rocked by doubt,
> Ravana's hailed dread keeps haunting life.
> A heart that never was foe-tamed, exhausted
> that remained unconquered in thousand trials
> is disconcerted at taking on the enemy
> In the weak heart, a sense of defeat comes . . . (ibid.: 99)

Rama is retrieved from his image of *maryada purshottum* that the successive cultural nationalists constantly imposed on him. He is at his frail human best as he remembers, rather romantically, in a flash back, his wife Sita, a captive of Ravana in Ashok Vatika:

> Eyes meet eyes in secretive communion;
> eyelids on new eyelids, their maiden rise-fall,

> trembling shoots of foliage, undulating pollen
> singing birds heralding new life, Malabar-trees all around
> heavenly light-fall as though the image of my first love
> Janaki's desirous-eyes first quivering trance . . . (ibid.)

The poem mirrors Rama's conflict, as it alternates between a war scene and a cherished moment of love, a flicker of hope with a fear of loss. The poem maintains the typical nationalist male distinction between *ghar* and *bahir*, yet the very memory of Sita in the battlefield suggests the intervening capacity of the former in the latter, and that the two domains cannot be easily segregated from each other.

The unassailable Rama of Tulsi's *Manas* undergoes a bout of existential anxieties; he literally weeps: 'then he listened—Ravana's raucous laughter/from the sentimental eyes dropped two watery pearls' (ibid.: 156). Vibhishana exhorts Ram to keep up his morale:

> Pride of *raghukul*, you are becoming small in this moment;
> you are turning your back when it is a moment of victory.
> How much effort has gone waste! When you are all set to meet
> Sita, you are mercilessly withdrawing your hand from her! (ibid.: 102)

The 'small Rama' of Nirala later on in post-independence Hindi poetry paves the way for the 'small man' (*laghu manav*) as its protagonist. In words that behove ordinary human beings, Rama expresses his despondency:

> Spake Raghumani—friend, war we shall not win
> for it is not just a war between devils and men-monkeys.
> *Mahashakti* itself has descended on the scene on Ravana's calling.
> Where there is injustice, *shakti* is on that side! (ibid.: 102)

Rama's dwindling morale corresponds with the tentativeness of the nationalist elite of the late 1930s.

In the face of utter hopelessness, the impeccable divine lord is exhorted by his subordinates to re-invent *Shakti* so that it no longer sides with imperial forces. Jambvan's intervention is significant:

> Answer devotion with firm devotion.
> Win over your own body with restraint.
> If Ravana by being impure can cause distress
> then, surely you by attainment will destroy him.
> Worship, imagine *Shakti* all over afresh. (ibid.: 103–4)

Nirala's re-invention of *Shakti* in poetry in a very subtle sense parallels Gandhi's endeavour to redefine *swaraj* in politics.[22] The control over one's self is one supreme precondition of winning (over) *Shakti* as well as *swaraj*. Towards the end of the poem, *Shakti* is won over, and despair turns into optimism: 'win, you will win, O new being, the best among men/saying this *mahashakti* dissolved into the body of Rama' (ibid.: 107).

'Ram ki Shakti Pooja' thus culminates in the rejuvenation of *Shakti*. It is through sheer devotion and commitment that Rama secures the favour of *Shakti*. This in a way is also suggestive of the trajectory of Indian nationalism that harnessed western knowledge to its advantage through its hard work and commitment. Also, that Indian nationalism was never simply derivative, it was a new form of nationalism, a reinvention of its dormant *shakti*.

V

The project of Indian nationhood becomes much more intricate and challenging after independence, because until 1947, the Empire emerges as an identifiable adversary, and the poetics of protest could safely be formulated in terms of the broad postcolonial binary of the self versus the other. In the post-1947 scenario, nation-making becomes more an enterprise of self-critiquing than pillorying against colonialism. In moments of self-criticism, the 'otherified' India begins to ponder over its own contradictions, and the structures of social discrimination within. Hindi poetic imagination, that until 1947 relies heavily on nationalist fervour or anti-colonial sentiment, seems to discover new grounds of discontent and dissent to carry forward its radicalism. The anti-colonial impulse in the post-independence phase continues as it identifies internal forms of oppression that remained obscure in the 'larger' nationalist struggle. The so-called 'side-issues' postponed during the 'larger' enterprise of the freedom struggle soon begin to surface.[23]

After having written his nationalistic narratives *Kurukshetra* and *Hunkar* during the peak of the colonial period, Dinkar, just after independence, settles down to write an epic in seven cantos (*sarga*s) on Karna entitled *Rashmirathi*. As issues of social justice and dalit emancipation begin to gather greater urgency beyond the political freedom attained in 1947, the poet turns inward and begins to probe structures of caste-hegemony from within the emerging nation-state.

In his introductory remarks to *Rashmirathi*, Dinkar reveals a shift in his stance as he begins to take on the role of a post-independence poet-activist: 'This is an age of emancipation of dalits and the have-nots. Therefore it is natural that the socially-conscious poets of the nation are attracted towards those who stand as silent symbols of the neglected and defamed humanity since ages' (1960: iii).

Written in *charit-kavya* form, *Rashmirathi* covers the entire trajectory of Karna's life as that of a benevolent dalit leader who has no moral scruples in aligning with Duryodhana in his fight against the hegemony of the brahmanical elite represented by Guru Dronacharya and the Pandavas. The entire poem can indeed be read as an allegory of complex pre- and post-independence caste politics, with Ambedkar masquerading as Karna, Gandhi as Krishna, Nehru as Arjuna, Kunti as Mother India and Duryodhana as the British Raj.[24] In this creative interface of history and mythology, the cultural nationalism of pre-independence gives way to what might be described as 'religious humanism'—humanism circumscribed by high religious/spiritual imperatives.[25] The mythical characters are subjected to human scrutiny as the veneer of cultural nationalism thins down, but their subversive caricaturization is still out of mind.

Dinkar's Karna is not in any sense a modern-day strategic transgressive subaltern, for he invokes larger humanist ideals for his emancipation:

> Hey Lord, sheer labour reverses the figures of destiny.
> And the dice of fate is defeated by virility.
> And high ambitions are but strengths of human beings
> they keep us on our toes, waking us . . . (ibid.: 66)

In terms of his demeanour, Dinkar's Karna is too sanskritic to be identified with an ordinary native dalit. Except for his caste, he bears a perfect royal persona: 'Bodily, he is warrior, mentally he is emotional and by nature he is philanthropic/ . . ./ has adequate practice of meditation, scriptures and armaments' (ibid.: 2). His speech has classical restraint and decorum.

The predicament of Dinkar's Karna is not very different from that of Ambedkar and vice versa. Both tend to fight discrimination but within the over-arching frame of the high Hindu ideal of renunciation. If Ambedkar seeks redemption in Buddhism, Karna is philanthropic to the extent of absolute selflessness:

People like me
never carry the burden of gold.
They earn to fritter away.
The diamonds that they bring are squandered
They never take anything from the world.
They even give their hearts in charity. (ibid.: 54)

Both, despite vehement differences with the *savarna* order, shy away from forging a separatist dalit ideology and succumb to the pressures of dominant Hindu nationalism. In fact, despite siding with Duryodhana in the great battlefield, Karna does not want to augment the sorrow of the exiled Pandavas. He asks Krishna not to disclose to Yudhishthira his 'story of birth', otherwise:

He would never accept the empire
and would pass on all property to me
which I shall never be able to keep with me
and would hand over to Duryodhana
Pandavas shall thus remain deprived
Never shall they get over their sorrow. (ibid.: 57)

Despite the Pandavas being his adversaries in the battle, Karna thinks of their well-being. Duryodhana is not his ideological choice, but a strategic one.

Dinkar's Karna does not spare his mother Kunti, much against the nationalist imperatives of unqualified motherhood. Mothers, step- or real, are to be respected and revered, irrespective of what they do to their wards. Karna evinces little *maryada* of a twice-born Hindu as he takes on his indifferent mother:

Why didn't she die herself, after killing her son?
Wanted to live by turning indifferent, cruel and tough—
what should I say O devi? I was simply unwanted.
But mother what character you lived? (ibid.: 93)

The nationalist archetype of the self-effacing Mother India is turned upside down as Kunti is castigated for being apathetic to her low-caste son. Kunti is forced to admit her crime:

Son, I am indeed a big sinner
I am a vicious female-snake in human-form
Can there be another woman on this earth
Murderess, crooked, sinful as I am? (ibid.: 101)

The descent of Kunti from 'mother' to 'murderess' is so melodramatic that Karna simply relents and falls at her feet, thus postponing the possibilities of an all-out aggressive dalit discourse. He is easily co-opted by the nationalist discourse that after independence operates under the mask of secular humanism.

The discourse of *dharma* runs supreme, and the tyranny of the so-called sacred is seriously challenged but never reversed:

> Karna, how pure his character is! As long as he was in the battlefield,
> his mother's animate image remained haunting his mind.
> Having brought Sahdev, Yudhishter, Nakul, Bhim under his noose repeatedly
> he let them go with a laughter, receiving as though some intimation from inside. (ibid.: 137)

Dinkar's Karna, portrayed as a dalit hero, thus fails to puncture the miasma of rarefied nationalist discourse in a clinching manner. His war with his high-caste adversaries, though staged for the restoration of his honour, turns out to be no more than a mock-fight.

Rashmirathi as a poem thus marks a crucial stage in the making of India as a nation-state. The fact that Karna takes centre stage signals the rise of discontent among the margins of the new Indian state. Mere *dharma*-based nationalism is not adequate unless the state provides a space of honour to its low-caste people. Since the poem stops short of radical social engineering, it is not dalitist by radically separatist post-nationalist standards. The sanctity and supremacy of nation, *dharma*, family, etc. are maintained rather steadfastly, without really disturbing the so-called social equilibrium in a fundamental way. Hegemonic nationalism does question its politics of exclusion, but never gives in.

VI

The nationalist imagination continues to operate through mythical archetypes even as secular and statist imperatives begin to impinge on post-independence politics. Dharamveer Bharati's *Andha Yug*, a five-act poetic play written in the wake of the partition, denounces the self-destructing violence in which cultural nationalists indulge to defend and consolidate the arbitrary divisions drawn by the colonial powers.[26] Invoking the classical metaphor of *kalyug*, Bharati restages the trauma of partition's violence and politics through the familiar

allegorical frame of the *Mahabharata* war. Such a teleological extrapolation brings the nation-centric postcolonial present in contact with the supranational civilizational past. The resultant nation-nationalism overlap not only explains the complex making of India, but also its hybridized predicament.

The Kauravas and the Pandavas as the two warring factions of the same clan are like Jinnah's Muslim League and Gandhi's Congress, battling for supremacy over each other right at the stroke of India's imminent decolonization. The guards pacing up and down the desolate corridors of power—defending 'nothing' (2005: 28)—remind us of Matthew Arnold's poignant image of 'ignorant armies/clashing by night' (1971: 131) in the high tide of European nationalism. Dhritarashtra (most probably modeled after Jinnah) represents the blind rage of narrow nationalism that he accounts for in terms of his being 'born blind' (2005: 34):

> My senses were limited by my blindness.
> They defined the boundary of my material world.
> . . . . . .
> My love, my hate, my law, my dharma
> has evolved out of my peculiar world. (ibid.: 33–34)

The Pandavas, led by Yudhishthira (probably Nehru), stand for opportunistic and manipulative nationalism. Yudhishthira kills the invincible Guru Dronacharya through half-truth; Ashwatthama alleges, 'Yudhishthira's half-truth killed him' (ibid.: 52). In Bharati's scheme, neither of the two warring parties could claim moral superiority over the other. Eyes with or without sight lacked vision; therefore, the poet-playwright deploys the metaphor of blindness.

Krishna as Gandhi is trying to hold on to his stereotypical moral-metaphysical stance, though he is portrayed as a vulnerable human figure who could be 'cursed, loved, worshipped, abandoned and killed' (Bhalla 2005: 3). The portrayal of Krishna as a tentative god is in keeping with the general post-independence mood of humanizing the mythical. Krishna's speech has all the moral predilections of Gandhi, the philosopher-politician:

> In this terrible war of eighteen days
> I am the only one who died a million times.
> Every time a soldier was struck down
> Every time a soldier fell to the ground