The *Tamasa* of Politics: Forging of Political Communities in Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*

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> Today there's an absorbing *tamasa* at Koyeritola. 'Bolunteer' will perform *Satiagira* in the village. The same kind of excitement prevails when the Ramkhelia troupe visits. But *Satiagira* is an even more breathtaking occasion.

Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*[1] is constructed around many *tamasas*. These range from the durbar *tamasa* (DCM, p. 8) to the Satiagira *tamasa* mentioned above. The *tamasa/teohar/puja* is the fulcrum around which the community celebrates its specific existence and reiterates the rules of its differentiation from other groups, as well as reinforces its continuity by publicly enacting the sense of collectivity that binds each individual to the others who make up the community. Like the text from which it derives its name, as well as the formal plan and the limits of play of the main character, *Dhorai Charit Manas* is also about a man and his relation to several different communities, his function within them and their decisive influence on him. Given the varied aspects of the relation between the individual and the communities that underlie the structure of his identity, the *tamasa, teohar* or *puja* highlights the interactions that create this multi-layered individual self which is impossible to define without reference to the communities' role in the definition. Apart from this, the rules of community formation are also enunciated in the special moments in the life of a community, marked by the *tamasa/teohar/puja*. Thus, in what follows, we will read the text using what we may call the poetics of the festival. The structure and dynamics of a *teohar* or *tamasa* or *puja* will be analysed with respect to the reciprocal relation between the individual and the community that participate in these festivals. Through the analysis of these events will emerge the process by which a new type of community is formed using the already established methods of festival mode of community establishment. Hence, before we turn to the text itself, it is necessary to outline what we mean by the 'structure' and 'dynamics' of the festival – what allows apparently mundane events to achieve the status of important markers in the lives of those who participate in them.

Jogeshchandra Ray[2] points out that apart from the *utsav* outlined in the *Smritis* there are also additional 'extraneous' ones which he calls 'aachar', local and specific to particular events in the rural agricultural calendar. As

the root of the word 'parva' Ray identifies the Sanskrit word 'parvan', meaning bond, friendship. Hence, both the *Smriti*-directed *utsav* and the expression 'aachar' have as their base the idea of community. In the first case, the details of date and method of worship are spelt out and therefore fixed or, at least, authentically controlled by the hegemonic social class; but in the second case, since the *Smritis* have no particular and binding guidelines, the details, the method and the occasion are more flexible and open to popular interpretation, though of course custom and usage may lead to a crystallisation of a traditional mode of worship. However, it is this second, more flexible form of the *utsav* that we shall use as a methodological tool in reading the *teohar/tamasa/puja* that abound in Bhaduri's text. The reason for this choice is simple. The people who inhabit this text are members of the depressed classes, their daily problems are those of earning a living. Their speech is the corruption of the standard Hindi with its mixture of Urdu and Sanskrit words – fittingly, they talk of *tamasa* instead of the more genteel *tamasha*, of *teohar* instead of the more refined *utsav* or even *tyohar*. And the writer draws our attention to this difference, because each of the chapter titles are in intentionally ornate Bangla[3] that is used in slightly dated literature, whereas, in the text, the Bangla is colloquial, interspersed with Hindi words as spoken by the characters. Dhorai and his people inhabit the areas to the east of the former course of the Kosi river, the areas that lie by the *pakki* or pitch road known as the Kosi-Siliguri road, part of the pre-Independence United Province where the Congress had come to power. The focus of the text is the effect of the nationwide movement of 'Ganhi baowa' or Mahatmaji on the lives of these people. Evidently, the creation of the community that is described in the text is a political process, but the method through which this community comes into being and the impact it has on the lives of the people whom it implicates follow the pattern of the congregation and focus associated with the *tamasa* or *teohar*.

The 'aachar' class of celebrations which are popular among those like Dhorai and his people are centred around changes in the material world, and the object of worship is a symbolic representation of the deity to whom the festival is dedicated. In reality, this object is something, like the grains of newly harvested paddy or the snake, common to daily life, which achieves the status of an object of worship through its seasonal nature and through the importance it holds in relation to the quotidian lives of the villagers. It is these 'aachars' that underlie the structure of the *tamasa* or *teohar*, because, rather than being scripturally controlled and economically beyond the reach of the poor due to the elaborate rituals and due to the need for the priestly class's intervention in the performance, these festivals can be celebrated at the micro level, with communal agency and without the rigidity and fears of pollution and sin attributing to the worship of images of deities. There are two aspects to the worship in the 'aachar' – one that relates to the worship of a deity symbolised by some material related to the life-cycle or occupation of the celebrants; and the other that relates to specific ways in which the

people of different areas celebrate the festival according to their own customs and local traditions. Given the central motive of celebrating a particular event around a deity, the actual celebration itself grows into a *tamasa* – the occasion for a congregation, for enjoyment linked with some core of curiosity that enables the participants to remember the occasion and use it as a historical marker. Another aspect of the core that shapes the occasion is a reason for the occasion that produces a bond of unity. The structure of the *teohar, tamasa* or *puja*, therefore, is based on the creation of a particular community; the aim, means and methods by which this is defined, its work and effects, may be called its dynamics.

Before we move on to analysing the *teohar/tamasa/puja* according to the structure outlined above, it is necessary to look at the society in which these occur. A life within the community is in no way novel for the people who inhabit Bhaduri's text. The tenets that motivate their lives are clearly enunciated thus:

> A son does not belong to the father – he belongs to the caste-community [*jaat*]. After the *jaat*, it is the neighbourhood [*tola*] that has rights over the child. (DCM, p. 58)

Apart from this, the chief protagonist Dhorai is brought up not by parents related to him by blood, but by a man related to him through the community. His first home is not within a family house, but in a communal place of worship, the *adda* of his foster father, the itinerant Backa baowa. When Dhorai's father dies, the entire *jaat* shaves its head as a sign of communal mourning. Out of this kind of belief is born the holiness of the *panch*, his power to sit in judgement over all in the community regardless of the person's position: "It is said that, let alone a man, even a snake will come if the *panch* calls it; if he calls up a tiger, it will be present" (DCM, p. 57). The importance of the *panchayat* or the *jatiaari sabha* thus is paramount in the lives of the villagers – it is the final body that decides rules for the shape of the community by its decisions on the exclusion of those who are judged beyond the pale of society. However, *jaat* is not the only basis of the divisions created within a larger body like the village or locality. The first part of Dhorai's life is spent in Tatmatoli. The Tatmas call themselves Tantimachhari – they work as domestic help, *gharaamis* in the houses of upper-caste people, and their traditional occupation is to clean up uncemented wells that choke up with sand. Tatmatoli is separated by bamboo forest from Dhangortoli. The Dhangors are descendants of the untouchable Oraons. Most of the inter-community clashes that Dhorai sees in his early life are caste quarrels between the Dhangors and the Tatmas. There is no concrete difference between the two communities – both are equally poor. But the Tatmas are proud of their caste, calling themselves Chhatri, a corrupt form of Kshatriya, and they look down upon the Dhangors, whose traditional occupation is to thatch roofs. The main bone of contention is that Dhangors

are not finicky about what they do by way of a living, whereas the Tatmas are particular about what they do. So, though Dhorai is the target of the *panchayat's* wrath when he takes up work on a road-gang with the Dhangors, this same Dhorai agitates for the Tatmas to take the sacred thread and become twice-born Hindus. Despite this, the Dhangors are Dhorai's friends who stand by him when he is in trouble or when he celebrates a happy occasion. The community that is created at work, therefore, becomes more important in Dhorai's life than the *jaat* to which he belongs. At the same time, Dhorai detests Samuar Dhangor, who is his rival in love, both for his conversion to Christianity and for his oily ways – but not because he is Dhangor. The differences therefore seem to be graduated – beginning from the individual level, *jaat* and religion seem to be the bases of exclusion or inclusion in the formation of a community – an element that needs to be kept in mind for the importance that it has in the formation of the political community of Ganhi baowa.

Apart from caste, however, there is also the economic factor, something that Dhorai learns when he leaves Tatmatoli and goes further east to a village of Kushbahachhatris called Bishkandha. Bishkandha is Dhorai's introduction to an agricultural community. Here, caste is the basis of economic divisions as well – in fact, economic considerations often fragment the solidarity among the same caste-community. For example, the chief of the Kushbahachhatris, or Koyeris, is Gidhar Mandal, who has no compunctions about uniting with the local landlord Babusaheb, to the detriment of the welfare of the community that he is supposed to represent. This patron-client relationship is different from the relation between the upper castes and the Tatma leaders; for the latter, the *jaat* is a sacred idea rather than a political or economic one, and the reason for this seems to be the fact that in the case of Gidhar Mandal, the bait that draws him closer to the ruling class and away from his own class/caste community is the lure of palpable wealth – land. The sheer magic of one's own land is described thus:

> Is there any other matter to compare with the subject of land? The army takes over the land near the Bakarhatta common, even the government takes over the lands bordering the Kosi. After all, land means money. Money respectably earned comes from land. On the other hand, if you want to add respectability to your wealth, you require land. Land to cultivate, pasture-land, *nikash* land, land for paddy, land for tobacco, land for corn. He who has it, wants more; he who never had any wants some today; those who had some and couldn't keep it will obviously want some. Let the world change. Let even the *Ramayan* be altered. Land and more land, land and more land. Yet strangely, everyone demands land on the strength of precedents quoted from the *Ramayan*. (DCM, p. 297)

Land is another name for wealth, and even the established repository of all norms in the country, the *Ramayan,* is pressed into service for the acquisition

of land and its justification. In this village, too, there are people who belong to a lower caste than the Koyeris – the Santhals. Between them, there is not so much the barrier of caste as there is competition for land. The traditional basis of community formation, caste, is cross-hatched on the basis of access to scarce resources. Just as Gidhar Mandal disregards caste and establishes an entente with the landlords, so the Santhals and the Koyeris sometimes overstep the boundaries of caste that are supposed to divide them, when they present a common opposition to the landed class/upper caste. Generally, Babusaheb tries to play off the two lower castes against each other. When he buys up the land farmed out to the Koyeris for share-cropping, and gives it over to the Santhals to farm instead, the two communities are at daggers drawn. When Mahatmaji's 'bolunteers' inform them that a new law has been passed whereby the harvest will be divided according to a rate beneficial to the share-cropper, and the landowner will have to give a receipt to the cultivator for the grain that he takes, both communities decide to enforce this law in their area, and they help each other in moving the grain to their own houses rather than to the storage bins of the landlord. But at the actual moment, the Koyeris don't come to the help of the Santhals. However, in the case of the taking of the *nikash* land for cultivation, Babusaheb is faced with a joint protest.

> Babusaheb had made a slight miscalculation. He hadn't thought that the people of Koyeritola would bother about a buffalo belonging to the Santhals being sent to the pound. However deep be the conflict between brothers, can they watch unmoved if their mother is disrespected? Those lands are *nikash* lands – the cattle traverse that path on their way to drink, women use that land when they need to, for ablutions, to preserve propriety; all life-cycle rituals, *dasabidh karam*, are performed there, if an animal dies, it is disposed of, if a child dies, he is to be buried, mud for the walls of huts is dug from those banks – these are the functions of the *nikash* lands. So, the usurpation of these lands cannot be a mere caste concern. (p. 281)

Babusaheb's move becomes an occasion for mass protest. The procession that goes to his house to demand justice is led by Dhorai and the son of the Santhal Badka Majhi, and the slogan that they shout is "Jai Mahabirji." Contrasted to this united front is the attitude of Gidhar Mandal who has wrangled an official position in the earthquake relief operations due to his friendship with Laadlibabu, the landlord's Congress-sympathiser son. So Gidhar has stolen cement and plastered his walls – he no longer needs mud, so the usurpation of common lands does not affect him, and despite his position within the caste-community, he is no longer the leader of the protest. Rather, the pound, which belonged to Insaan Ali, has been bought in Gidhar's name by Babusaheb, since Insaan Ali is a Muslim; and as a result of this loss he has gone over to the Muslim League.

However, in Bishkandha, though land is the focus for all alignments, the caste-community is not to be completely discounted – in fact, politically, the *jaatiari sabha* may form the basis of power and prestige for its leaders. Complicated equations underlie the shifting boundaries that define communities. Dhorai comes from a comparatively simple village where there is no 'fixed' concept of assets from which income can be generated. The Tatmas have their own bodies on which their incomes are based, whereas in Bishkandha, land as well as finer caste-community divisions creates a complex structure. Dhorai thinks:

> A head-on confrontation between two parties was something that [he] had understood since childhood. But this was like [an altercation between] a number of groups; a number of people, a number of different types of conflict, had become knotted together. It was impossible to gauge who was on which side and when, which group was concerned with which issue and for what length of time. The conflict began with the aim of protecting individual property, but an individual can't fight alone . . . it's because one can't fight alone that one bangs one's forehead at the threshold of caste-community. . . . And if there's any help forthcoming from anyone outside the community, one doesn't hesitate to run to him for support. . . . (DCM, p. 228)

In a nutshell, this describes the process of politicisation of the caste-community. But this process occurs under the guise of another type of community-formation. When the Koyeris receive an invitation for a Satyadev *katha* at Gidhar Mandal's, they are quite surprised. Gidhar is not famous for his generosity – why should he invite the entire *jaat* to his house for a *puja* which is generally performed when someone has achieved what he desires and wishes to thank God for it? And if he does wish to do so, why restrict the invitation to the Koyeris, leaving out Dhorai, who has effectively become the leader of the village? It transpires that under the cover of a Satyadev *katha* Gidhar and the religious leader of the Koyeris, Garbhu Paonidaar, have other plans. After the *katha* is done, Garbhu gets to the point:

> It is necessary to unite and fix the Rajput and Bhumihar Brahmans. The Congress is Mahatmaji's only in name. The Rajput Bhumihars have tricked Mahatmaji and usurped the party . . . [L]ast time, the Congress got votes with our help. So this time, we've decided that the Kurmachhattri, Kushbahachhattris and Jadubanshichhattris will get together and contest against the Bhumihars. (p. 266)

So sub-caste divisions, a contentious issue, have been overlooked in the interests of political power. The power, certainly, will not be for the entire community, but for the leaders of the communities: Dhorai is excluded because he does not command or belong to a group; so he cannot be

depended upon to deliver a bloc of votes. Apart from this, operating as a free agent in Bishkandha, he does not have the ties and roots that settled community-members have. This makes him beyond pressure and free from subjection to chastisement by the community – therefore he is a wild card from the point of view of those with political aspirations. Dhorai himself is well aware of his separate status, and acts from this knowledge as well:

> Being a *pardesi*, a foreigner, certainly has its advantages. It doesn't matter if one loses, who cares if one has to leave the village? He had not been scared of a clash with the *panch* in the place where he had roots – there was no question of being scared here. (p. 206)

The importance of this Satyadev *katha* in the text is manifold. It is an 'aachar', an occasion celebrated for the fulfilment of specific desires of the celebrants – so it is here used as a front for a political meeting. Apart from this use, it is nevertheless a *puja*, a solemn occasion invested with religious overtones – so it serves not only to draw a crowd together, it also lends the solemnity of religion and an unspoken divine sanction to the deliberations that are carried on around it. In fact, the ground for reading this occasion in this manner is created by the previous *tamasas/teohars* that occur in the text.

If we begin from Dhorai's birth itself, we will see how the author underlines the importance of these occasions in Dhorai's life, and how events that occur in his life are connected to the community's memory of its own span of existence. The *tamasas* help to locate him temporally and spatially in the community. The first instance of a *tamasa* is the Durbar *tamasa* held on the occasion of the Delhi Durbar of 1912. The celebrations in Jirania cannot be attended by Dhorai's mother Budhni because she is still polluted from childbirth – Dhorai is only five days old, and the period of ritual pollution lasts six days. There is no question of Dhorai's community or even his parents remembering the exact date of his birth. However, the *tamasa* could be used as a frame of reference in collective memory, the hook on which Dhorai's individual identity could be communally relevant. The same applies to his father's death, and his final and decisive detachment from his mother. Dhorai's father dies of a fever a few days after the *tamasa* of the *hawa-gadi* (p. 12). The local 'Collister Saheb' brings a motor car to the area – the excitement and incomprehension that marks this incident is wrapped up with the memory of Dhorai's father's death, which occurs due to a fever he was already suffering from when he went along with the others from the village to see the strange contraption. And then, Dhorai's final rift from his mother is marked by the *tamasa* of the end of the war. His mother is widowed young – all the people of the community advise her to remarry, and she is quite keen to do so herself. Her chief suitor is Babulal, the 'Collister Saheb's *chaprasi*'. But the main hitch is Dhorai. Babulal is not willing to accept Budhni with Dhorai, and no one, least of all Budhni, blames him for this. So, Budhni leaves the child at the holy place occupied by the dumb

itinerant ascetic, Baoka baowa. Dhorai becomes attached to his foster parent, and is quite happy without his mother, whom he hardly knows. Yet, Budhni cannot swallow her guilt at abandoning her first-born. She keeps sneaking off to meet him and bring him things from her prosperous housekeeping. This continues until she has another child – and once more during a *tamasa*, Budhni is recovering from childbirth, and cannot participate. The *tamasa* of the war-end is a government-sponsored one, so Babulal, who works for the government, brings home a huge quantity of sweets. Budhni pleads with him to ask Dhorai to come to their house for a share in the sweets, and contrary to his general attitude to Dhorai, Babulal agrees. But seeing his 'mother' with another child, seeing her well-ensconced in the house of a man he instinctively hates, Dhorai only wants to eat his fill grudgingly and run away. And he recoils when Budhni tries to pet him. The *tamasa* (pp. 20-21) that marks the end of the war marks the birth of Budhni's second son – she is henceforth known as Dukhiya's mother rather than Dhorai's – and her alienation from her first child. It marks, by extension, the complete communalisation of Dhorai himself – he no longer has any ties with a single person to whom he is related biologically. In that sense, this last *tamasa* establishes the effectiveness of the communal bond that defines Dhorai's life and identity, over the basic tie of blood that establishes the primary form of community. This shift becomes important for Dhorai as well as for the central change that the text narrates – the formation of this second order of community can be seen as a macro-process that will later be given enlarged shape in the formation of a nation-wide political community, with the idea of Ramrajya as its base.

Thus far, the account of the *tamasas* has been oriented to defining the importance they have in the life of an individual, though this individual is seen, through the narratives of the *tamasas*, to become a part of a larger community, and to derive his identity from that process, rather than from the circumstances of his birth. This is the dynamic that characterises the process by which the ideology of Ganhi baowa takes root in the rural countryside. So, apart from indicating the method of marking important milestones in the existence of an individual within the context of the larger collective, the *tamasas* also outline the process that is the central concern of the narrative – the formation of a larger community that is ostensibly not based on any hitherto accepted concept of bonding, like caste or family. In fact, the strategy for this type of community-formation is focused through the narrative that deals with the growing up and the subsequent adventures of Dhorai, who is essentially the child of a community.

And early in the narrative, after the decisive rift from his mother marked by the *tamasa* of the end of the World War, comes the episode of the revelation of Ganhi baowa etched on a pumpkin growing in the courtyard of Rabia Tatma. The supernatural powers of Ganhi baowa are proved by his sudden appearance in a place least expected (pp. 32-5). Stories of his eschewal of meat, fish and onions, of his hatred for wine, his celibacy and his

powers that far surpass those of the local *guni* or wise-man, have already reached the Tatmas through the orature networks. There now remains no doubt about his divinity. Baoka baowa, being a holy man himself, is asked to cut down the stem of the pumpkin which bears Ganhi baowa and instal it in the Military Kali temple. A *puja* is performed, in the true 'aachaar' style, with all that the Tatmas can gather for an unforeseen event like this. But a problem arises: as the priest in the Kali temple points out, despite Ganhi baowa's greatness, how can he, a living god, be installed by the side of Sitaram? The lack of resources that daily plague the Tatmas seems heightened by this incident. How can a poor community like the Tatmas find a place that is worthy of this great god who has revealed himself not to the rich, but to them, in keeping with his professions of love for them? They are too poor to make him a separate temple, as the rich do for the gods that are their patrons. The collectivity of the worshippers of Ganhi baowa is formed on the basis of their poverty, of their caste and class, both of which are obstructions to fulfilment of their desires. The *puja* of the pumpkin *avataar* is completed when Baoka baowa initiates Dhorai as a *bhakt*, who will henceforth be a vegetarian and wear a *tulsi*-bead string around his neck to mark his special status. Dhorai therefore becomes a follower of the path of truth and justice, a path identified with Ganhi baowa himself. The religious structure of this entire event that marks the direct entry of Ganhi baowa in the lives of the villagers simply prefigures the way in which the teachings of Gandhi and his own image were constructed indicating the process by which he became acceptable to the village population.

The politics of the festival enables us to discern this process in detail. The *tamasa* of the Darshan is one such element in the process of acceptance and establishment. When Dhorai is small, he forces Baoka baowa to take him to see Ganhi baowa, traversing a distance of seven *kos*. And later, Sagia and Mosammat, in whose house Dhorai finds shelter at Bishkandha, insist that Dhorai take them for a *darshan* of Ganhi baowa despite the distance being twelve *kos* and there being no mode of transport apart from their own feet. The hardships and the trials of the roads to holy spots, the pilgrimage, its importance and the overwhelming desire to go to the abode of a particular god braving all these barriers are common to Hindu belief. The *darshan* of Ganhi baowa assumes similar overtones, because Mahatmaji is Ramchanderji himself, his words are as weighty as those written in *Ramcharitmanas* (p. 261). The *darshan* itself resembles a massive *tamasa,* with Mahatmaji as the object of worship. As the women think:

> . . . blessed be the power of all the good works they have done in their lives. Blessed be Ramchanderji! They couldn't stop looking at him! They had seen many *sadhubabajis* earlier. But they had never seen a god in the flesh before this. (p. 239)

They surge forward with the crowd to touch Mahatmaji's feet and place their offerings there – two pice each, given out of their own meagre resources. So,

later, when the battle with the Rajput landlord reaches its height, and money is needed by the Koyeris to fuel the struggle in the courts of law, Dhorai ruefully reflects that in such cases, Mahatmaji is helpless – how can he come to the aid of his followers when he is as poor as they are? This is a further step in the likening of the leader to Ram in the Kaliyug – he is just like his followers, he has human troubles and feelings, but he is possessed of a sense of right, of spiritual prowess that makes him rise above them in stature.

The Satgiria festival – called "Utsav" in the chapter-title, and *tamasa*, as we have seen, in the text (p. 286) – shifts the focus from the established divinity of Mahatmaji to the deeds of his *chela*, the local Congress Bolunteerji. This is a premonition of the active participation of the Koyeris and of Dhorai particularly in the movement that has been legitimised by ascribing the status of god to Mahatmaji. The Satiagira is performed in Bishkandha as a part of a plan drawn by Mahatmaji's Bolunteers' consciousness-raising in the villages until the seditious pronouncements against the British finally reach the ears of the officials and the Bolunteers are jailed. The effect of this *tamasa*, what it means to the Koyeris and others like them is eloquently described:

> Even Dorai does not know what *Satiagira* means, but the word sounds familiar. The real pleasure in listening to a ghost story consists in the hair-standing-on-end feeling of fear. The same fear mingles with the mystery of *Satiagira*, too: red-turbaned police, plough-bullocks impounded by the authorities, eating the jail-*khichri*, hakim, who knows what other terrible things. With the curiosity that surrounds *Satiagira*, mingles the enchantment of Mahatmaji's name, as the satisfaction of walking twenty *kos* to pour water in the temple of the sage Rishasringa mingles with the capers and laughter of the *tamasa*. (pp. 286-7)

This sums up the process and relates it to the structure of the *tamasa*. The inner, spiritual satisfaction of communicating with the gods, linked to a communal celebration centred around a particular occasion characterises the *tamasa/teohar/puja* network that is woven into the text. The political mobilisation that takes place as a result of the movement spearheaded by Gandhi is characterised by this form of organisation and legitimisation. In fact, in reply to the question asked by the villagers about what *Satiagira* actually is, Dhorai explains that it is a battle like the one fought by the followers of Ramji with Ravan – this is between the Rangrej and Mahatmaji. That is why the *Satiagira* cannot start until the Darogasaheb comes – it's not as if this is a play like the ones performed in the bajaar, which cannot start until the Darogasaheb comes as chief guest (pp. 288-9). Though the endless speeches of the 'Bolunteer' are totally incomprehensible to Dhorai and his friends, they have understood the situation and its importance in terms of their own familiar sign-system, and their participation is also determined by this interpretation.

This structure operates in all the cases where a political agenda is

presented by either the 'Bolunteer' in person or by any source that brings news of Mahatmaji. Hence, when the news of his arrest reaches Bishkandha, an immediate wave of militancy sweeps the area. The Rajput landlord is put firmly in his place, his position and his power over their lives no longer serve to earn him their servile respect. The local silkworm-producing centre, "titli kothi," is burnt and destroyed because Dhorai and his friends identify it with the Rangrej government that has jailed Mahatmaji. The seething, fiery crowd in the weekly market force Babusaheb to join the chanting of slogans. The non-violent salt movement, the *Satiagira tamasa*, all are now things of the past – the phase of militancy has begun. The movement is into its second stage (pp. 301-7).

In the throes of the excitement after Mahatmaji's arrest, Dhorai announces in the market, "No one should go against the orders of Mahatmaji. Whoever disregards these order is the public's enemy. If the *bish kandh* (twenty shoulders) of Bishkandha join together, no one will be able to get away with wrongdoing" (p. 303). These words indicate the composition of the political community that has evolved through the *teohar/tamasa* structures. The power of the god one worships is decided by the number of non-believers who accept his supremacy. The Christian youth Antony joins the Kranti Dal which becomes the fugitive Dhorai's community when the police begin to hunt for him after the burning of the titli kothi (p. 336). Dhorai is sceptical of the sincerity of the Christian recruits, because they are known to come to the Kranti Dal as spies and infiltrators – after all, their names never appear in the lists when the whole community is fined by the government. The greatness of Mahatmaji is underlined by the fact that he has made even the Muslims give up meat and onions (p. 36). Yet, these are only counters to measure the force of Mahatmaji's power. When it actually comes to the actual forming of the community, there is a strict law of exclusion/inclusion which operates on a logic similar to that on which the laws that exclude the poor or the low castes from the *utsav* category of *parvas* are based. Simply, just as the Koyeris or Tatmas are designated as unclean and kept away from holy work or worship, similarly they too use financial plenty as the dividing line for permitting people to join in the *tamasa/teohar* centred on Mahatmaji. In the Tatmatoli celebration, when Mahatmaji appears on the pumpkin, the son-in-law of the local trader Kapil Raja sends jaggery and green plantains to be offered to the pumpkin-deity. But the Tatmas don't touch these gifts because the donor has gained his wealth from an unclean business – he trades in skins (p. 35). Apart from this, when the *Satiagira* is being arranged by Dhorai at Bishkandha, he rejects the flowers the young boys steal from Babusaheb's garden to make a garland for the Bolunteer, because flowers from the garden of a rich Rajput exploiter are unfit to serve in the holy cause of Mahatmaji. These instances clearly indicate the multiple interpellations that create the basis for community. Class, caste, political or religious belief, all are interwoven to form the popular base of the larger community that was mobilised in Gandhi's cause.

We have used the poetics of the festival to show how the political ideology is articulated to fit into a religious discourse and semiotic system, enabling the already existing bases and strategies of community-formation to freely function in the service of the political ideology being thus propagated. The alien experience of forming a political collective that either cuts across or subsumes all the divisions inherent in the process of formation of a religious community is thus not directly dealt with. It subsists as an implicit contradiction to some extent, for though the religious sanction on "clean castes" is seen to be complicit with designs of the exploiter-class, the division between the followers of different religions or the divisions between sub-castes lead to fragmentation of solidarity among those who are united by their poverty and their status as the exploited. Further, the politicisation of these divisions has long-lasting and terrible effects as is evident from recent history. Thus, the formation of a political collective through this strategy has immense potential for both effectiveness and danger; whether it is desired or not, the message and the semiotic vehicles used in its communication are heavily invested with religious residues. The political field of Ramrajya identifies and sanctifies a goal and the struggle to achieve it because of the connection with the divine figure of Ram. From the text it is evident that as a leader, Gandhi's appeal lay in this very identification, as "Raghunath reborn in Kaliyug" (p. 236). The depiction of the festival of democracy, the election, within this semiotic system turns out to be an interesting mixture of both the political and the religious symbols. Pitho Majhi worships the ballot-box with oil and *sindoor,* as Lakshmi is worshipped (p. 263); even Dhorai folds his hands in supplication before he casts his vote. The ballot papers are distributed to the Koyeris as letters from Mahatmaji – each member of the electorate feels there is a personal link between him/ her and the leader who has achieved the status of god. This personal communication with the divine lends solemnity and holiness to the occasion. But as he stands before the ballot-box, Dhorai also thinks of a nation-wide community in terms that are both sophisticated and poetic:

> Through these letters, so many people in one corner of the land are being able to reach Mahatmaji, in another corner, together, at the same time. Tatmatoli, Jirania Bishkandha, mofussil-markets, Dhorai, Rampiyari, Pitho Santhal, Bolunteer, Tilkumajhi, Mastersaheb – they all want the same thing. The government, hakim, police, landlord, Circle-manager, Gidhar Koyeri, Babusaheb, Insaan Ali and probably Samuar the Christian are against them. They don't belong to the same caste-community, yet how close they've come to one another. Just as Ramiya and his son are his own yet so distant from him, so these others are not related to him in any way, and are yet so close to him. A fragile network like the delicate spider-web; it breaks if you go to grasp it, it's so fine. You can't make out all the time whether it's there or not; when it sways in the wind, is sprinkled with the morning dew, or suddenly sparkles in a ray of sunlight, only then can you see it, but then too, not clearly. Right across

> Ramji's territory, his avatar Mahatmaji is weaving such a web of delicate threads . . . this bond does not eat into the flesh . . . it remains only like the sour-sweet taste of the *aamloki* fruit once it's swallowed – a faint relish of a loved taste . . . . (pp. 236-7)

The concept that Dhorai has evolved of democracy, profound and complex, rests in fact on the formation of communities across the barriers of class and caste. But at the same time, those who are defined as the 'other' are also excluded on the basis of religion (Insaan Ali), caste and class (Babusaheb, the Rajputs) as well as for being oppressors. How much of these definitions subsume both religion and politics, carrying the caste-bias and the religious hatreds into the political arena as factors underlying the formation of collectives as well as factors that serve to distinguish these newly-formed collectives from others that are the results of the similar process? In the present context, perhaps these are questions that literary texts will address. Bhaduri's narrative, published in the middle decades of this century, prepares the ground for understanding the dynamics of community-formation in the throes of the nationalist struggle. Apart from this, it narrates the process which fuels the wave of community-feeling that arose then, in all its complexities. In fact it is this element of community, heightened in the *tamasa/teohar/puja* that binds the narrative together, pointing out something that is even more relevant today for those who are actively combatting the results of the process which began then and ran aground in the years that have followed. People in the rural areas, with whom urban intellectuals wish to work, whom they wish to 'change', 'uplift' or 'retrieve' or even 'induce' to 'revolution' have their own ways of understanding and reacting to ideologies, however sophisticated, and have their own semiotics of resistance and revolution. Those are the signs and methods that must be deployed if the political community of the future is to be created by a movement that embraces the land, that is woven into one fabric by the fine threads of political ideology.

NOTES

1. Satinath Bhaduri, *Dhorai Charit Manas* (First published 1356 [1949; I Part] and 1372 [1965; II Part]). The edition used in this essay was published in 1388 (1979) by Bengal Publishers, Calcutta. The text is cited in the text as DCM, page numbers following. All translations are mine.
2. Jogeshchandra Ray Vidyanidhi, *Puja Parvan* (Calcutta: Vishwabharati, 1905), pp. 51-2.
3. Bangla is still divided into the sadhu (Sanskritised or pure) and the chalit (literally, the current), though literature is now written almost wholly in the latter.

The Law of the Threshold

Women Writers in Indian English

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What Malashri Lal offers as 'the Law of the Threshold' can be an important methodological resource for feminist literary criticism in India. This law does not permit women to trespass the boundaries of home. Dr. Lal sees the acquisition of English as a complicating factor for women seeking to recreate their inner world of energy and their Indian experience as literary artefacts. The result, as Dr. Lal demonstrates through close, symptomatic readings of Indian women's English writing from Toru Dutt to Bharati Mukherjee, is a literary tradition marked by disjunctions and schisms, a tradition superficially made up of simple, smooth writing but containing a hidden subtext featuring women's sad compromises, frustrated anger and repressed desires. This writing, Dr. Lal argues, offers masked autobiographies in which women's personal lives are depersonalised in time and place through the creation of the literary 'other'.

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