

# The Conflict between Criminality and Morality in *Earthen Lamps*

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Jhaverchand Meghani (1896-1947) happens to be a very important writer of Gujarat. He studied at different places and graduated in 1916. He served in Calcutta for more than two years and acquainted himself with Bangla language and literature, especially the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Ultimately he gave up his lucrative job and returned to Saurashtra. In 1922 he joined the editorial board of *Saurashtra*, a Gujarati newspaper and devoted the rest of his life to journalism. During his life span of fifty-one years he wrote eighty-eight books. These include poetry, short stories, novels, travelogues, biographies, autobiographical works, translations and adaptations. But his most lasting contribution has been in the field of folk literature. He has published sixteen collections of folk tales, ten of folk songs and five works on criticism and interpretation of the folk literature of Saurashtra.

Meghani's own works are highly coloured by his love for folk literature.<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx and Rabindranath Tagore influenced his writings to a great extent. Most of his poems have been collected in *Yugavandana* (1935). He has written more than a hundred stories, which have been collected in *Meghani's Navalikao* (1931-46). He has written thirteen novels, four of which are transcreations. *Niranjana* (1936) deals with the conflict between the rural and the urban ways of life. *Soratha Taram Valhetam Pani* (1937), *Vevisala* (1939) and *Talasikyaro* (1940) depict the rural life of Saurashtra. *Prabhu Pandarya* (1943) has life in Burma as its background while *Samarangana* (1931) *Ra Gangajaliyo* (1939) are his historical novels. *Satyani Sodhanam* (1932) *Aparadhi* (1938) *Bidetam Dwara* (1939) and *Kalachakra* (1947) are his other novels. Gujarati novel before Meghani was primarily concerned with the urban middle class society. Meghani for the first time introduced in Gujarati fiction the rural life, characters, events and idioms. His contribution of changing the canvas of Gujarati is very significant. He has also published some essays and letters in addition to

the translation of the plays by Dwijendralal Roy and Rabindranath Tagore.

"The author is thoroughly dissatisfied with the structure of the society, old or new. In both the social structures he finds the same type of hypocrisy, selfishness, cowardice and bluster. This society offers no scope for man's individuality, enterprise or the spirit of service to blossom. The bulldozer is always there to smash to smithereens anything that does not fit in its scheme of things."<sup>2</sup> Though dissatisfied with the negative aspects of Indian society, Meghani is not a pessimist. On the contrary, he is a man of the masses and has a great concern for them. He wants to improve the society by enlightening them with his realistic portrayal of life and suggesting his concealed idealism and nobility of thought and emotion, which may be termed as deeply humanistic.

*Earthen Lamps*<sup>3</sup> happens to be a very significant novel written originally in Gujarati by Jhaverchand Meghani, dealing with the different kinds of conflict in colonial India. Set against the Gujarati area during 1920 to 1947, it offers a realistic picture of different types of human struggle. It captures the ethos of pre-Independence India, especially of Gujarat area where like anywhere else in the country, the stirring of national consciousness could be seen. Mahatma Gandhi, the epic hero of national freedom comes from the very land of Gujarat. Mahatma Gandhi with his moral dynamism and charisma could bring about a great transformation in the psyche and society of India. He dedicated his entire life for the fight against injustice and oppression by the British rule. He had a large following to execute his goals and ideals. Ravishankar Maharaj, happens to be one of the devoted followers of Mahatma Gandhi. During the last fifty years of the colonial rule, India was torn between several social, economic and political problems. On the one hand, Indians had to fight with the external enemy i.e. the British; on the other hand, they had to fight with the internal enemy in its various manifestations. Jhaverchand

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Meghani has chosen to depict the life of Ravishankar Maharaj and his reformist activities in the tribal society of Gujarat. He is a Gandhi-figure who struggles to reform the society through moral education and selfless love for humanity. Whereas Mahatma Gandhi concentrated on the fight with the British rulers, Ravishankar Maharaj concentrated his attention on the moral education and reformation of the Gujarati society consisting chiefly of tribal communities with a criminal bent of mind

It is really paradoxical that the land of Gujarat should be rife with violence, criminality, and dacoity in spite of the fact that the son of Gujarat, Mahatma Gandhi should be a great proponent of non-violence. Ravishankar Maharaj who may be described as a minor Gandhi (like Hardekar Manjappa of Karnataka) has to deal with such criminals and outlaws of the villages of Gujarat. He is a forty-year-old Brahmin who wears a dhoti, a shirt and a cap and nothing else. He is known for his Spartan life. He walks barefoot from village to village to educate people on morality and help them have justice in their day-to-day life. He eats only one simple meal of *khichdi* per day and sleeps on a cotton mattress on the floor. Though not formally educated in school and college, he is known for his social concern and moral dynamism. That is the reason why the villagers respect him wholeheartedly. "Usually when he met one of them on the road, the man would stop, take out his turban and spread it on the ground and then he would insist that the Brahmin should stand on the cloth. Even with the scorching rays of a mid day sun beating down mercilessly, the farmer would then bow down to pick up a pinch of dust from near the brahmin's feet and apply it to his own forehead"(p.1). In conformity with the Gandhian view that real India is rural India (Grama-Bharata), Ravishankar Maharaj has the first hand knowledge of the rural life of Gujarat and responds to the problems of rural people in a very sincere manner. When the banks of the river Vatrak and Mahi were under a dark shadow of the reign of terror let loose by three gangs of robbers led by Babar Deva, Namdariyo and Dayabhai 'Fozdar', the villagers grow really panicky and do not know how to escape from that dire situation. No prudent traveler considers it safe to travel on the road along the river Mahi at night. But Ravishankar Maharaj who hears the news about the terrorist activities of the outlaws, considering it to be his duty to solve the problem of the villagers. He, therefore, walks the distance from Bharkunda village to Saraswani village (both situated in the district of Kapadvanj in Gujarat state) at night and enquires the villagers about the whereabouts of the notorious outlaws. He has a first hand knowledge of the villagers that he meets and recognizes their voices even in darkness like a

shepherd who knows each of his animals by its bleat. Punja, the villager whose voice the Maharaj has recognized, dissuades him from going ahead in the dark because "There are some bad people ahead." But Ravishankar Maharaj assures him, "There is nothing to worry about, Punja. I am looking for them"(p.2). When Punja expresses his fear that the outlaws may molest him, Maharaj tells him confidentially "None would molest me. Come on. Take me to them"(p.3). But Punja articulates his fear further, "No! Father mine, I won't go, nor shall you. If they harm you, I shall not be able to protect you and I shall have to kill myself in shams. Please turn back. They may even hold you as a hostage"(p.3). But Ravishankar Maharaj is not afraid of death as he has already pledge not only his life but also his death to the battlefield of Bardoli in 1922. Maharaj insists that he should be conducted to the place where the outlaws are hiding. Punja, therefore, takes him to a farm and directs him to go ahead. Maharaj dauntlessly walks ahead in the dark where he is threatened by a gunman. Far from being frightened by the gunman, Maharaj lets out a loud and hearty laugh. Two more gunmen appear and stand in front of him. Then the leader of the outlaws comes riding a horse. In spite of their threatening words, he tells them fearlessly, "I want a word with all of you." When another ten or twelve outlaws emerge from the darkness, he tells them, "Come closer and sit down"(p.6). When the outlaws ask him about his identity, he replies that he is also an outlaw and that he belongs to Mahatma Gandhi's gang. The outlaws are rather puzzled and silenced by Maharaj's reference to a new gangster. Maharaj explains the reason for his meeting them, "I have come to teach you the ethics of an outlaw against the British Raj. The root of all our miseries lies in an alien ruling over us. Your tiny gangs are no good. Two months from now there would be a lot of shooting in Bardoli. If you want to be true outlaws, come to the Mahatma. He is the one who is fighting for everyone's welfare"(p.7). The outlaws question the bonafides of Gandhi, but Maharaj tries to convince them about the nobility of Gandhi's struggle, the importance of spinning and weaving to oppose the mill cloth of England. The outlaws listen to Maharaj patiently but they acquaint him with their own ethics. They reply, "We don't bother about the poor folks. Have you ever heard of our looting or killing any except the wealthy or the exploiters?"(p.7) But when Maharaj accuses them of their regular habit of bribing the police constables, they remain silent with embarrassment. However, they bid goodbye to him reverentially. Maharaj returns to Saraswani village in the dark. Ravishankar Maharaj is, thus, an embodiment of fearlessness and moral courage and dynamism. He is, obviously, a true

disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and his idealism.

Frequent imprisonments are a common experience for a socio-political activist like Ravishankar Maharaj. He takes all these disconcerting experiences in his stride. When he enters the Sabarmati Jail in 1942, a fifty five year old man and warder of the jail meets him and tells him reverentially that he is none other than the gunman Moti, the outlaw who had threatened Maharaj twenty years ago. Maharaj notices that Moti Baraiyya has undergone a lot of change from a defiant youth to a sober man. As he has ripened over the years, he has learnt to respect Ravishankar Maharaj and his noble cause.

Although Ravishankar Maharaj is a Brahmin by birth, he does not practice the traditional untouchability, exclusivism and ritualism. Far from practicing varna-system and caste discrimination, he follows the highest religion of humanism. That is the reason why he has sympathy for all the people including criminals and dacoits. When he visits a village, he feels sad to see a mukhi show off his authority by taking the roll call of the men and women of criminal communities. Maharaj learns that the roll call is taken twice a day because most of these men and women are thieves and that the roll call is necessary to prevent them from thieving and robbing. Disliking the mukhi's highhanded behaviour, Maharaj goes to one of the villagers' house and stays. He is pained to think of the roll call, which degrades a human being to the lowest degree. He feels a deep emotional bond with these people who are branded as criminals as soon as they come out of their mothers' wombs. "He felt soothingly that they were his own people, his kinsfolk. He knew that many of them were thieves, that these people knew very little of God, religion, goodness and righteousness or of such other concepts idolized by the society and yet he felt close to them, he felt one with them"(p.21). In his oneness with the thieves and criminals one may easily see the Buddha's compassion or Jesus Christ's love for mankind. He, therefore, goes to meet the police-chief of Vadodara, explains the situation and urges him to order for the cessation of the roll call. Accordingly, the police-chief issues an order to cancel the roll call. But the grampanchayats fear that the exemption from roll call will encourage the patanwadias to loot the surrounding villages. They, therefore, petition the administration to impose the roll call once again on the villagers. But when Maharaj hears the news, he rushes to Vadodara once again to meet the magistrate and succeeds in getting the roll call cancelled. The selflessness of Ravishankar Maharaj is exemplary and incomparable. The clerk in the magistrate's office is surprised to see such a selfless man. "The clerk readjusted his glasses to study the Brahmin. To him it was incredible that without a

selfish motive someone would persist in visiting the magistrate's office day after day, that without a motive of personal gain someone would walk forty-eight miles time and again. He found it difficult to comprehend this as a reality or as a miracle"(p.25).

Ravishankar Maharaj has no formal education but he has a deep love for humanity including the criminals. "He refrained from preaching. All he gave was pure and simple love; all he expected from them was a bond of affection"(p.28). He leads a very simple life. He walks barefoot and does not use any vehicle. A typical Gandhi-figure, he spins yarn on his spinning wheel and is interested in selfless service. He wants to help whoever is in trouble. Once a peasant and brother-in-law of a notorious outlaw Khodia comes to Maharaj and requests him to help him in improving Khodia. Maharaj, therefore, goes to Pamol village and meets Khodia who has been hiding on a farm along with his mistress. He asks Khodia to surrender to the police so that he could escape with a little fine. Khodia agrees to oblige Maharaj the next day. Hence Maharaj returns to Kavitawala village and waits for Khodia. Khodia has been so unpopular in the village that nobody cares to tell anything about his whereabouts. Maharaj feels deeply disappointed by the non-arrival of Khodia to Kavitawala and fears the disaster that is imminent. "It was as if a shepherd's pet lamb had strayed off the herd. An animal had turned into a tramp. Now, the question was whether he would be able to save it from the wolves"(p.33). Maharaj's fear comes true after a few days. He learns that Khodia is offered police protection for helping them to catch another thief. When Maharaj is having his feast with Darbar Gopaldas in Boman village, he learns that Khodia has kidnapped a *patidar* boy and demanded a ransom of five hundred rupees and that he has an accomplice named Bikha from Dedarada village. Maharaj instantly goes to Dedarada village and takes Bikha to the fozdar. Bikha is ordered by the judge to be put into lock-up. But before Maharaj leaves the police station, Bikha requests the former to take him out so that he can get Khodia also. Maharaj unwillingly requests the police officer to release Bikha temporarily and promises to bring him back overnight. Although the police officer hesitates to take the risk, he finally agrees to release Bikha at night because of his respect for and great trust in Maharaj. When Maharaj returns to the police station with Bikha and Sankaria in the early morning, the police officer is overjoyed to realize that his faith in the Maharaj is vindicated. He treats them with milk and tea. Later Maharaj tries hard for the reduction of Bikha's prison sentence from thirty-two years to only seven years. Maharaj, thus, acts as a guardian, saviour and reformer of the criminals thereby contributing to the reduction of

social evil and of punishment to the outlaws.

Maharaj is rightly known as the *fozdar* of Mahatma Gandhi or as Gandhi, the junior. Ravishankar Maharaj wants to educate the outlaws and criminals morally and help them surrender themselves to the police so that their punishment could be reduced substantially. He is also simultaneously aware of the love-hate relationship between the outlaws and the police department. Many times the police department connives at the thefts and robberies because of the bribe that they can get from the criminals. Maharaj does not spare the police department either. At relevant times he vents out his anger at the corrupt officers and their bureaucratic evil. But in spite of his candour, the police department holds Maharaj in high regard.

Since Maharaj has been spreading the gospel of Gandhi in the rural area of Gujarat, the villagers are deeply influenced by his moral guidance and dynamism. Under his influence the people of Kalu village take a vow to stop stealing and drinking. They collect all the bottles of country liquor in a bonfire and burn them. "It was also agreed by all including the traders that should an incident of theft occur, the victim should report to Maharaj and not to the police" (p.51). But in Khanba village a thief called Gokalia has stolen some goods of a *luwana* and the *fozdar* has taken a bribe of forty rupees from Gokalia. The *luwana* has, therefore, lodged a complaint with the police. When Maharaj comes to learn the details, he is so deeply disturbed and depressed that he takes up the Gandhian decision of fasting unto death, which, in turn, acts as a great moral pressure on the guilty. As a consequence of Maharaj's fasting, the thief Gokalia confesses his theft. "Maharaj, this disciple of yours has erred—I hadn't known that you would persist to this extent" (pp.56-57). Gokalia's description of the interdependence of thieving and bribery throws ample light on social evil as well as bureaucratic evil in the Indian, in this case, Gujarati society. "The *fozdar* had come here yesterday. He had somehow found out that I had stolen the tins. He caned me a couple of times and demanded forty rupees as a bribe. What could I do? I went to the village of Ras and sold one of the tins for thirty rupees. Then I borrowed ten to make up the forty that was demanded by the *fozdar* and gave the amount to him. In order to repay the loan of ten rupees, I was planning to sell the other container too, Maharaj, you had to spoil everything! Over and above all that I lost, because of you I had to sell five pounds of ghee of my own stock to buy sufficient oil to fill the emptied container" (p.57). If the thieves are the curse of Indian society, the police happen to be worse thieves. Maharaj feels rather confused. It remains a mystery to him about who was the thief: Gokalia or the

*fozdar*? He also remembers the bitter and ironical truth about life told by the *fozdar*, "Believe me, Maharaj! The source itself is rotten to the core! The golden flask has a seat made of brass!" (P.57) The *fozdar* who is ignorant of Maharaj's moral dynamism and selfless service files a case against Maharaj and he is scolded by the Police Superintendent, an Englishman, for his stupidity. Maharaj is ready to fight against injustice wherever and whenever he sees it. When, for example, Vaghela murders the mukhi when the latter is returning from Vadadala to Dharmaj, ..bhai cleverly includes the name of five innocent villagers along with those of two killers in the last statement of the dying man. ..bhai has obviously done the mischief to take revenge upon his enemies. Consequently all the seven criminals get different kinds of punishment. But when Maharaj comes to know about the injustice, he consults Mahatma Gandhi and wants to defend the five innocent men who are falsely incriminated. When —bhai threatens Maharaj, the latter threatens the former by his moral power. When some well-wishers ask Maharaj not to take the side of patanwadias who are arch enemies of the Congress and born cut-throats and thieves, Maharaj replies that they are his kinsfolk. Although born in a puritanical high caste, Maharaj exhibits his high kind of humanism by considering the thieves and criminals as his kinsfolk. He helps the innocent men by employing lawyers to defend their cases and finally succeeds in getting them released from prisons. He does all these things with a purely selfless motive, which is really admirable.

Maharaj's moral power is so great that no sensible villager can dare disobey him. For example, when Vaghela is undergoing his term of imprisonment, Maharaj has to do an embarrassing duty. When Mahadev Desai, personal secretary of Mahatma Gandhi asks Ravishankar Maharaj to meet Vaghela *Patanwadia* of Vadadala and ask him to bequeath his land in their favour, Maharaj feels very disturbed, as he has to approach a man in the jail suffering the charge of murder. But when he goes to the jail and conveys the message of Gandhi to Vaghela, he is pleasantly surprised to see Vaghela willingly sign the document and ask for Gandhi's blessings. This event shows Vaghela's great respect for Mahatma Gandhi and trust in Ravishankar Maharaj.

Maharaj is so saintly in his attitude to life that he does not wish to harm even those who malign him for their selfish ends. When two armed criminals meet him one day and tell him that they want to behead —bhai as he has been abusing Maharaj, Maharaj dissuades them from doing so. Not only that. He even meets —bhai and tells him not to abuse him publicly lest he (—bhai) should be harmed by the criminals.

Ravishankar Maharaj fights as much against civilian criminality as against constabular cruelty and corruption in the Gujarati area. When he sees a villager called Jhala being mercilessly beaten by a *fozdar* on false suspicion, Maharaj vouches for the villager's innocence and prevents the *fozdar* from inflicting further pain on the villager.

Fula Vavecha happens to be a notorious thief of the area. Jhala and other villagers meet Maharaj and tell him how they want to catch Fula Vavecha by trapping him cleverly, but Maharaj, ascetic as he is by nature, does not allow them to indulge in such malicious tricks. On the contrary, he meets Fula Vavecha and enquires him about his thefts. Fula Vavecha invites Maharaj to his house and shows reverence to him. Then he defends his thievery philosophically. He has a firm conviction that stealing is not a sin at all because "the wealth cries out to us" (p.79). Fula's philosophy of thievery is very interesting: "Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, forced into hoarding in a house not of her own, longs to be liberated and scattered. I can hear her crying out from miles away. My heart calls out to me, 'Fula, get up and move!' And hence I move and help liberate the wealth so choked up, scatter her and expand her. A share of it goes to the *mukhi*, another to the *fozdar* too and yet another to the higher-ups. What remains for us, sire, is barely equal in weight to the thorns broken under our feet during the venture" (p.79). Fula's philosophy recognizes the necessity of thievery, the network of constabular corruption and the ultimate loss experienced by the thief. After enunciating his philosophy of thievery, Fula Vavecha offers Maharaj the details of his varied thefts. But Maharaj's very presence seems to have transformed his heart. That is the reason why he confesses, "Thus, Maharaj, we feel it in our bones. We shall never step near a house to which, we feel, the wealth belongs by right. God has created thieves to cleanse the dirt just as He has created carpenters, blacksmiths and sweepers to perform various tasks. Nonetheless, if you bid me stop stealing, I shall do so" (p.80). The murderer thus obliges Mahatma Gandhi through the mediation of Ravishankar Maharaj because of his great respect for both of them.

The villagers with a criminal tendency are busy with their life of elemental passions. They act impulsively and get into legal trouble and suffer the punishment of imprisonment. Again they try to get themselves released from there. When Ravishankar Maharaj happens to meet them, he tries to solve their problems whole-heartedly. For example, when Moti Baraiyya's wife falls in love with a police constable of the same village, Joshikova and lives with him by deserting her husband, Moti feels deeply insulted and suffers from utter loneliness. Moti, therefore, marries another girl. One day when he is returning home

after helping his friend to capture the truant buffaloes, he is insulted by his former wife and her lover. Unable to control his anger, he attacks the lover (constable) and kills him with his spear. It is only after the murder that he realizes the enormity of his crime. He, therefore, flees from the village along with his second wife. It is at this juncture that Ravishankar Maharaj happens to meet Moti Baraiyya. He takes Moti Baraiyya to Petlad Police Station and hands him over to the police thereby helping the Police Department in capturing the murderer. Then he also asks the police not to beat or torture Moti in the lock-up thereby mitigating his suffering to some extent. Moti Baraiyya seeks Maharaj's guidance and employs a lawyer to defend his case. Finally Moti is set free after an imprisonment of only eighteen months and not of longer duration. Maharaj's intention is not only to help the Police Department to maintain law and order in the region, but also to educate the criminals morally and bring about a psychological transformation in them.

Ravishankar Maharaj's moral influence on the society is so great that the villagers try to give up their criminal habits gradually and take to respectable ways of living. Maharaj had helped the people of Sampara town to be exempted from the roll call. This seems to have brought about a psychological change in the people. When Maharaj visits the *patanwadia* Mahiji's house at his invitation, Mahiji's wife bows down to Maharaj's feet and says, "Maharaj, at long last, your devotee has learnt something from you" (p.90). Her words are corroborated by Mahiji himself who confesses, "Yes, Maharaj. Till you came here at first, I had been leading a dog's life" (p.90). Mahiji's wife attributes her husband's transformation to Maharaj's moral influence. She further requests Maharaj to offer a *shabad* to her husband. Maharaj is surprised to know that people have begun to regard him as a man of miracles. However, unable to reason with the illiterate woman, he hands over his rosary to Mahiji and tells him, "Keep this with you. It was given to me by my *guru*. Daily after bath, light a ghee lamp and say your prayer by the name of Ram. He is the saviour of all sinners" (p.91). Maharaj, thus, assumes the stature of a saint in the eyes of the criminals.

Jivi (or Jiva) who was married to Mathur at the age of three had refused to go to her husband's place, as she disliked her husband's thieving habits. However, she went to live with him only after he promised to stop thieving and to set up a separate house. Gradually she improved the material conditions of her life –by owning some money, a bullock, a cart and some grain. She has four children. She is, therefore, called Jiba (Mother Jivi) now. When Maharaj happens to meet Jiba and ask her to spare some food grains for the needy during the famine,

Jiba readily agrees to oblige him mainly because of her great respect for Maharaj and his saintly stature. She distributes her grains silently among the poor people of her village. After the death of her husband, she consults the villagers and gives away four *bighas* of agricultural land to the village for growing birdseeds. Her behaviour obviously shows how deep the moral influence of Maharaj is upon her mind and heart.

Babar Deva who was also known as a *Bhagat* or a devotee turned out to be an uncontrollable criminal. He organizes a gang of his own and indulges in arson and bloodshed. He murders the *mukhi* of his village, his own paternal uncle and his own sister, Jharola. Alia joins Babar Deva's gang. But finally Alia is hanged by the police as per the wish of the nationalist leaders. Later Babar Deva is also captured cleverly by the police and ganged. Before being captured by the police, Babar Deva wants to see Maharaj privately and sends a message to him, but Maharaj does not wish to meet him, as he does not want to breach the trust and help the police to capture the criminal. Thus Maharaj acts as a man of high moral stature who does not want to betray even a criminal who has reposed such trust in him.

Having renounced the worldly pleasures, Ravishankar Maharaj has dedicated his life to the social reform and moral upliftment of the people. He begins a five days' journey with the narrator acquainting the latter with various kinds of people. The journey can easily be described as a pilgrimage because Maharaj does everything with a sense of religious dedication. On the way Maharaj acquaints the narrator with the flora and fauna of Gujarat area. He compares the *Nirmuli* or *Antarvel* creeper to the British Government, as the said creeper has no roots in the earth and can grow on any tree. While traveling along the River Mahi, Maharaj tells the narrator how he once saved a harijan's daughter and her child from being drowned in the midwaters of River Mahi. This great humanitarian act shows how he has overcome his brahmanical puritanism and caste discrimination.

In Valsad village there lives a young *charan* woman called Suraj-ba who is said to be an incarnation of Goddess Kali and who drinks the blood of buffaloes slaughtered in the temple. Once a *mukhi* sends for Maharaj to see the spectacle of slaughter. Maharaj goes and joins the procession and reaches the temple where a tiny buffalo has been led. When Maharaj meets Suraj-ba and asks her not to kill the buffalo, she grows very angry, sets her girls on him. The girls tear his clothes and bite his arm. He is rescued by the *mukhi* and his men. Then Maharaj learns that the buffalo has already been slaughtered and Suraj-ba has drunk at least ten litres of

the animal blood. Consequently the village boycotted the *charan* community.

When Maharaj and the narrator are on their way to Dahewan village, the former remembers a past event connected with Kheda district. When the Kheda district had been brutalized by Babar Deva, the Government imposed a punitive tax on the people. But in those days when there were no printing presses available, Maharaj wrote out many pamphlets and advised people not to pay tax to the Government. He even met the local king Narsingji and accused him of high handedness. Although initially the king hurled abuses at Maharaj, he later apologized to the saintly man.

Maharaj narrates another past event to the narrator. The king of Gajana was dependent on the British rulers and was not sympathetic to Mahatma Gandhi, his followers and the removal of untouchability. Maharaj met the king and asked him not to impose punitive tax on the people. But the king talked with Maharaj arrogantly and ordered him to clear away. Maharaj, therefore, stayed in a *dharmasala* at night. But a *ksatriya garasia* came and took him to his house, fed him and arranged for his speech in the temple the next day. Maharaj asked the people not to pay the punitive tax. The people promised to obey him. Maharaj gave the same advice to people in other villages also. The villagers had great respect for Maharaj because of his selfless service and great human concern. They vacated their villages when the officers came to collect the tax. The officers went back empty handed. Finally the tax was annulled and the confiscated goods were returned to the villagers.

Maharaj narrates another incident to his companion (narrator) about the floods of 1927. Maharaj had gone to Sundarana village to lift the roll call. There was a heavy rain and storm. The hosts offered him *khichdi* even when the wall of their house collapsed. Then Maharaj advised them to destroy the railway bridge near Dharmaj. They did as suggested by him and escaped the calamity by diverting the course of the water flow.

*Earthen Lamps* thus offers a very realistic picture of the criminal behaviour of the tribal people of Gujarat area of colonial India when the national consciousness was emerging slowly under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and his sincere followers like Ravishankar Maharaj. Jhaverchand Meghani holds a mirror to the wide gap between Ravishankar Maharaj's ascetic detachment, equanimity, selflessness, reformist zeal and dedication. Like Ravishankar Maharaj, the novelist also displays his dispassionate but compassionate approach to life in his delineation of the elemental struggle for survival and criminal behaviour of people. He exposes the criminal tendency of the tribal communities as well as the

corruption and bureaucratic evil of the police department and the British government in the colonial India with equal ease. The title *Earthen Lamps* is very significant in that it symbolizes the novelist's philosophy of life. The lamp, though tiny and earthen shines in the hearts of the rough and daredevil thieves and criminals. Like Ravishankar Maharaj, one has to see it in the overwhelming darkness. The language is realistic and succeeds in evoking the local colour of the Gujarati rural life. "Meghani is a master of Gujarati prose. It is he who has proved more effectively and successfully than anyone else the power of the language of the soil and given to Gujarati literature, more than anyone else, varied, fresh and lovely similes."<sup>4</sup> But the novelist is a bit indifferent to the structure of the novel in that he offers very lengthy descriptions of the events, which could have been summarized briefly. This amplificatory tendency is perhaps due to the fact that he was a practicing journalist and a folklorist who brought into the novel all that he knew about men and matters of Gujarat without caring for the sense of the form. "Written in installments under pressure of much other work, most of Meghani's novels lack symmetry."<sup>5</sup> But his depiction of the criminal psyche of the people is of special interest to criminologists and criminal psychologists. It easily brings to our mind the criminal world of Dostoevsky. In this elemental world one crime begets another crime in a chain fashion. Ravishankar Maharaj has a great task in bringing about a moral transformation in the souls of these criminals.

The novelist, obviously, believes in the ameliorative function of literature. His depiction of the criminality of the common man and the idealism of Ravishankar Maharaj is very convincing. *Earthen Lamps* easily invites comparison with other regional novels of other parts of India dealing with the colonial period. Meghani is easily comparable with Charles Dickens (English), Premchand (Hindi), Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao (Indian English) Shivaram Karanth and Basavaraj Kattimani (Kannada) as far as his social realism and philosophy are concerned.

Vinod Jhaveri has offered an excellent translation of his father's novel and helped the non-Gujarati reader with a detailed glossary of local terms and idioms. He has certainly enriched the Indian Literature in English Translation by clearing his debt to his father. One may hope to see the publication of a critical monograph on his father's literary achievements for the benefit of Indian scholars.

## NOTES

1. Amaresh Datta, Chief Editor, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Vol.V., (New Delhi:Sahitya Akademi, 1989), p. 2649.
2. Mansukhlal Jhaveri, *A History of Gujarati Literature*, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1978) p.176.
3. Jhaverchand Meghani. *Earthen Lamps*, tr. Vinod Meghani (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1979). All page references are to this edition.
4. Jhaveri, *A History of Gujarati Literature*, p.176.
5. Ibid., p.176.