

INDIAN CULTURE- 20th Century

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Part I : EARLY 20th CENTURY

Overview

These decades of political agitation and social upheaval left its mark on a variety of cultural forms. In this modernising half-century, cultural expressions that had historically relied on court patronage, such as the visual arts, the performing arts and poetry, struggled to redefine themselves. By contrast, the modern novel flourished as a medium for the expression of political and social ideas. Quickened by the nationalist spirit that swept the country, writers found new content and techniques with which to tell stories that spoke to a wide public. Literary magazines played a large role in popularising the new fiction by publishing short stories and serialised novels. Although the cinema was even newer than the novel, its mode of production and transmission meant that it remained under the control of the colonial government. The novel, an affordable, mass-produced and hand-held object, was the epitome of culture in early twentieth-century India.

Art

Painting In first half of the 20th century, painting sought to find a place within the politics of cultural nationalism. A 'Bengal' school of painting, led by Bengali intellectuals and British officials at the Government Art School in Calcutta, sought to move away from 'materialist' modernism and emphasise Indian themes and spirituality. A good illustration of this school is the oil painting 'Bharata Mata' ('Mother India') by Abanindranath Tagore, cousin of Rabindranath. The most distinctive painter of this period, however, was Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941). Born in Budapest to an Indian father and Hungarian mother, Sher-Gil trained in Paris before going to India in 1934, where she completed a series of remarkable paintings inspired by the Ajanta and Ellora cave works but rendered in a modernist idiom.

Bharata Natyam Although regarded by many as one of India's 'classical' dances, Bharata Natyam ('Dance of India') is largely an invention of the early 20th century. When a tradition of female temple dancing was banned by the government in 1910, Indians in Madras (supported by British officials and scholars) sought to revive and purify it by modelling it on the ancient *Natyasastra*. Allegedly erotic elements of the temple dance were expunged, and an institute was established to teach the proper movements. Performances were also taken out of temples and put on the urban stage in front of ticket-buying audiences.

Film

Despite the political turmoil, Indian cinema blossomed. After it began in Bombay in 1896, money poured in to finance studios, build cinemas and support companies that toured films all across the country. British-owned and run, these touring companies showed mainly sports, news, travel and topical documentaries. The first Indian feature was 'Raja Harischandra' in 1913. By the 1920s, only 15% of the hundred or so films made each year were produced by Indians. The advent of sound in the 1930s brought not just the 'talkies' but also the songs that are central to the success of Indian films. Regional cinema also developed in this decade, especially Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Bengali films. By 1950, Indians owned most of the industry and were producing the films that would later become classics.

Religion

The hardening of the communal divide between Hindus and Muslims, enacted in legislation, practiced in separated constituencies and cemented in the creation of Pakistan, fed the politicisation of religious identities. Islam, which had suffered the ignominy of Mughal decline, now felt like a beleaguered minority in India, and it suffered further when many Islamic scholars chose to live in Pakistan. Hinduism was given a makeover by Gandhi's non-violence, even though that principle was actually developed within Buddhism. Buddhism itself, more or less irrelevant for many centuries, experienced a minor recovery as two low-caste political movements (led by Dr Ambedkar in western India and Ramaswami Naicker in south India) drew inspiration from Buddhism's historical critique of the caste system. Christianity, energised by Protestant evangelism, spread rapidly in the northeast, while maintaining a major presence in coastal South India.

Literature

Sadat Hasan Manto Unusual among writers of this period, Sadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) specialised in the short story, and (like Chekhov and Maupassant) he wrote his Urdu-language stories with an eye for detail and character motivation. Some critics condemned his apparent fascination with violence and sex, but others praised his stories featuring prostitutes and pimps for their unsentimental humanity. He published 15 collections during his lifetime, with several more published posthumously. Critics have praised *Atis Paray*, ('Spares of Fire,' 1936) and *Cughad* ('The Fool,' 1948).

Premchand The social realist fiction of the Hindi writer Premchand (1880-1936) is characteristic of this period. His first novel was serialised in an Urdu weekly between 1903 and 1905, but thereafter he wrote in Hindi, publishing a dozen novels and more than 300 short stories. His last novel, and his masterpiece, was *Godan* ('The Gift of a Cow' 1936), in which he created a social world that stands for all of India. Gritty and sentimental by turns, it is a drama without heroes or villains. The main character fails to act on his self-professed Gandhian ideals but remains loyal to the system in which he was born and ends up dying in a ditch.

Sarat Chandra Chatterji The Bengali novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterji (1876-1938) were not social realist but still reflected the changing social landscape. Through the prism of the Bengali family, often with a focus on women, he explored the emotional consequences of external events. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he wrote fast-moving stories, with few authorial interventions, and relied on sudden shifts to maintain suspense. His most popular novel was *Binder Chele* (1914), but critics prefer *Srikanta* (1917-1933), a four-volume family saga.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay Another gifted novelist of this period was Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (also Banerjee, 1894-1950).

Writing in Bengali, he published 17 novels, 20 collections of short stories and several miscellaneous books (a travelogue, an autobiography, a translation of *Ivanhoe*, a Bengali grammar, and works on astrology and the occult). His finest work is undoubtedly *Pather Panchali*, published in 1929 as the first part of *The Apu Trilogy*. Rarely has an Indian novelist entered into the mind of a character as successfully as Bandyopadhyay does with the young boy Apu. Largely an autobiographical novel, it has the ring of truth, though the author invents events to enhance the drama. The novel was quickly translated into several languages and was brought to an even wider audience with the film adaptation by Satyajit Ray in the 1950s.

Putumaipittan Putumaipittan ('The Crazy One,' 1906-1948) was a Tamil writer who illustrated another strand of Indian literature of the period. Although Putumaipittan was a committed socialist, rather than produce realist fiction, he chose to write experimental, somewhat bizarre, stories. The most famous of his nearly one hundred short stories is 'God and Me', in which an ordinary man imagines that he is accompanied by god as he goes about his daily business. This juxtaposition of the quotidian and the divine generates satire of both human and godly behaviour. Putumaipittan also translated dozens of stories from English into Tamil and wrote an entertaining but fiercely critical biography of Hitler.

Manikkodi Putumaipittan was one of several radical Tamil writers whose careers were launched by (*Manikkodi*, 'The Jewelled Flag'). Published in Madras for only three years (1933 to 1936), this literary magazine featured short stories that challenged the accepted manner of telling stories. Narratives were fractured, told from different points of view; they highlighted the grotesque and the psychotic, sex and violence. This short-lived magazine was the beginning of modern Tamil writing.

Questions/Discussion

1. The quantity and popularity of Indian fiction in this period might be partially explained by non-literary factors. With the rise of print and literacy, there were clearly more publications and more readers. And the nationalist fervour meant that more of them were anxious to read, not just books, but also newspapers and magazines. This close correlation between print, nationalism and the novel has been noticed by scholars in other regions of the world (see B. Anderson's 1983 book *Imagined Communities*).

2. In this period, unlike the second half of the century, most popular fiction was written, published and read in regional languages, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi and so forth. This would change, after Independence, in favour of English-language Indian literature. What accounts for this radical shift in so short a time?
3. Many writers of fiction in this period went on to work in the film world. How did this shift of medium affect their storytelling?
4. Bharata Natyam is an example of what some have called an 'invented tradition.' Most cases of this phenomenon are the result of elites attempting to salvage a fast-disappearing heritage for cultural or political purposes, as described in 1983 by E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger in their book, *The Invention of Tradition*.

Reading

- Usha Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge, 2012)
- Amit Chaudhuri (ed.), *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (Picador, 2001)
- Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Post-colonial Politics of Music in South India* (Duke, 2006)
- Robert Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford, 2008)
- Bakhle Janaki, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 2005)
- Janet O'Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharatanatyam on the Global Stage* (Wesleyan University, 2007)
- Indira Peterson and Devesh Sonoji, *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (Oxford, 2008)
- Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (eds.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (OUP, Delhi, 2004)
- Prem Choudhury, *Colonial India and the Making of Imperial Cinema* (Manchester University, 2000)

Text

'The Shroud', by Premchand, trans. F. Pritchett

At the door of the hut father and son sat silently by a burnt-out fire; inside, the son's young wife Budhiya lay in labor, writhing with pain. And from time to time such a heart-rending scream emerged from her lips that they both pressed their hands to their hearts. It was a winter night; everything was drowned in desolation. The whole village had been absorbed into the darkness.

Ghisu said, "It seems she won't live. She's been writhing in pain the whole day. Go on-- see how she is."

Madhav said in a pained tone, "If she's going to die, then why doesn't she go ahead and die? What's the use of going to see?"

"You're pretty hard-hearted! You've enjoyed life with her for a whole year-- such faithlessness to her?"

"Well, I can't stand to see her writhing and thrashing around."

It was a family of Chamars, and notorious in the whole village. If Ghisu worked for one day, then he rested for three. Madhav was such a slacker that if he worked for an hour, then he smoked his pipe for an hour. Thus nobody hired them on. If there was even a handful of grain in the house, they both swore off working. When they'd fasted for a couple of days, then Ghisu climbed trees and broke off branches, and Madhav sold the wood in the market; and as long as that money lasted, they both spent their time wandering idly around. *

When their hunger grew intense, they again broke off branches, or looked for some work.* There was no shortage of work in the village. It was a village of farmers; for a hard-working man there were fifty jobs. But

people only sent for those two when they were forced to content themselves with getting out of two men the work of one.

If only the two had been ascetics, then they wouldn't have needed any exercises in self-discipline to achieve contentment and patience. This was their very nature. Theirs was a strange life. Except for two or three clay pots, they had no goods at all in the house. Covering their nakedness with torn rags, free from the cares of the world, laden with debt-- they suffered abuse, they suffered blows too, but not grief. They were so poor that without the smallest hope of repayment, people used to lend them something or other. When peas or potatoes were in season, they would dig up peas or potatoes from the fields and roast and eat them, or break off five or ten stalks of sugarcane and suck them at night. Ghisu had spent sixty years of his life in this pious manner, and Madhav, like a dutiful son, was following in his father's footsteps-- or rather, was making his name even more radiant.

This time too, both were seated by the fire, roasting potatoes that they had dug up from somebody's field. Ghisu's wife had passed away long ago. Madhav's marriage had taken place the year before. Since this woman had come, she had laid the foundations of civilization in the family. *Grinding grain, cutting grass, she arranged for a couple of pounds of flour,* and kept filling the stomachs of those two shameless ones. After she came, they both grew even more lazy and indolent; indeed, they even began to swagger a bit. If someone sent for them to work, then with splendid indifference they demanded double wages. That woman was dying today in childbirth. And these two were perhaps waiting for her to die, so they could sleep in peace.

Pulling out a potato and peeling it, Ghisu said, "Go see what shape she's in. We'll have the fuss over a ghost-witch-- what else! And here even the exorcist demands a rupee--from whose house would we get one?"

Madhav suspected that if he went into the hut, Ghisu would finish off most of the potatoes. He said, "I'm afraid to go in."

"What are you afraid of? I'm here, after all."

"Then *you* go and see, all right?"

"When my wife died, for three days I never even left her side. And then, won't she be ashamed in front of me? I've never seen her face-- and today I should see her naked body? She won't even have bodily ease: if she sees me, she won't be able to thrash around freely."

"I'm thinking, if a child is born-- what then? Dried ginger, brown sugar, oil-- there's nothing at all in the house."

"Everything will come. If Bhagwan [god] gives a child-- those people who now aren't giving a paisa, will send for us and give us things. I've had nine sons. There was never anything in the house, but this is how we managed every time."

A society in which those who labored night and day were not in much better shape than these two; a society in which compared to the peasants, those who knew how to exploit the peasants' weaknesses were much better off-- in such a society, the birth of this kind of mentality was no cause for surprise. We'll say that compared to the peasants, Ghisu was more insightful; and instead of joining the mindless group of peasants, he had joined the group of clever, scheming tricksters. Though indeed, he wasn't skilful in following the rules and customs of the tricksters. Thus while other members of his group became chiefs and headmen of villages, at him the whole village wagged its finger. But still, he did have the consolation that if he was in bad shape, at least he wasn't forced to do the back-breaking labor of the peasants, and others didn't take improper advantage of his simplicity and voicelessness.

Pulling out the potatoes, they both began to eat them burning hot. They had eaten nothing since the day before. They were too impatient to wait till the potatoes cooled. Both burned their tongues repeatedly. When the potatoes were peeled, their outer parts didn't seem so extremely hot. But the moment the teeth bit into them, the inner part burned the tongue and throat and roof of the mouth.

Rather than keep that ember in the mouth, it was better to send it quickly along inward, where there was plenty of equipment for cooling it down. So they both swallowed very fast, although the attempt brought tears to their eyes.

Then Ghisu remembered a landowner's wedding procession, in which he had taken part twenty years before. The repulsion that had been vouchsafed to him in that feast was a memorable event in his life, and even today its memory was fresh. He said, "I'll never forget that feast. Never since then have I had that kind of food, or such a full stomach. The girl's family fed snacks to everyone. As much as they wanted! Great and small, everyone ate puris-- ones made with real ghee! Chutney, raita, three kinds of green vegetables, a flavorful stew, yoghurt, chutney, sweets. How can I tell you now what relish there was in that feast! There was no limit. Whatever thing you want, just ask! And however much you want, eat! People ate so much, ate so much, that nobody could even drink any water. And there the servers were-- setting hot, round, sweet-smelling pastries before you! You refuse, saying you don't want it. You push away the tray with your hand. But that's how they are-- they just keep on giving it. And when everybody had wiped their mouths, then everybody got a *pan* as well. But how could I be in any shape for a *pan*? I couldn't stand up. I just staggered off and lay down on my blanket. He had a heart as big as the ocean, that landowner!"

Enjoying the story of these grand festivities, Madhav said, "If only somebody would give us such a feast now!"

"As if anybody would feast anybody now! That was a different time. Now everybody thinks about economy-- 'don't spend money on weddings, don't spend money on religious festivals!'. Ask them-- what's this 'saving' of the poor people's wealth? There's no lack of 'saving'. But when it comes to spending, they think about economy!"

"You must have eaten twenty or so puris?"

"I ate more than twenty."

"I would have eaten up fifty."

"I couldn't have eaten less than fifty. I was hale and hearty. You're not half of what I was!"

After eating, they both drank some water, covered themselves with their dhotis, curled up, and went to sleep right there by the fire, as if two gigantic serpents lay coiled there.

And Budhiya was still moaning.

In the morning, when Madhav went into the hut and looked, his wife had grown cold. Flies were buzzing on her face. Her stony eyes had rolled upward. Her whole body was covered with dust. In her stomach, the baby had died.

Madhav came running to Ghisu. Then they both together began loudly lamenting and beating their breasts. When the neighbors heard the weeping and wailing, they came running. And following the ancient custom, they began to console the bereaved.

But this wasn't the occasion for an excessive show of grief. They had to worry about the shroud, and the wood. Money was as scarce in their house as meat in a raptor's nest.

Father and son went weeping to the village landlord. He hated the very sight of their faces. A number of times he had beaten them with his own hands-- for theft, or for not coming to work as they had promised. He asked, "What is it, Ghisua, why do you weep? Nowadays we don't even see you around. It seems that you no longer want to live in the village."

Ghisua fell prostrate on the ground, and said with tear-filled eyes, "Master, I'm in great trouble! Madhav's wife passed away last night. All day she was writhing in pain, Master; we two sat by her bed till midnight. Whatever medicines we could give her, we did. But she slipped away. Now we have no one to care for us, Master-- we're devastated-- our house is destroyed! I'm your slave. Now who but you will take care of her final rites? Whatever

money we had at hand was used up on medicines. If the Master will show mercy, then she'll have the proper rites. To whose door should I come except yours?"

The Landlord Sahib was a compassionate man. But to show compassion to Ghisu was to try to dye a black blanket. He felt like saying, "Get out of here! *Keep the corpse in your house and let it rot!* Usually you don't come even when you're called-- now when you want something, you come and flatter me! You treacherous bastard! You villain!" But this was not the occasion for anger or revenge. Willingly or not, he pulled out two rupees and flung them down. But he didn't open his lips to say a single word of consolation. He didn't even look in Ghisu's direction-- as if he'd discharged a duty.

When the Landlord Sahib gave two rupees, then how could the village merchants and money-lenders have the nerve to refuse? Ghisu knew how to beat the drum of the landlord's name. One gave two pennies, another gave four pennies. In an hour, Ghisu had collected the sum of five rupees in ready cash. Someone gave grain, someone else gave wood. And in the afternoon Ghisu and Madhav went to the market to get a shroud. Meanwhile, people began to cut the bamboo poles, and so on.

The sensitive-hearted women of the village came and looked at the body. They shed a few tears at its helplessness, and went away.

(3)

When they reached the market, Ghisu said, "We've got enough wood to burn her, haven't we, Madhav?"

Madhav said, "Yes, there's plenty of wood. Now we need a shroud."

"So let's buy a light kind of shroud."

"Sure, what else! While the body is being carried along, night will come. At night, who sees a shroud?"

"What a bad custom it is that someone who didn't even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she's dead."

"After all, the shroud burns along with the body."

"What else is it good for? If we'd had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine."

Each of them inwardly guessed what the other was thinking. They kept wandering here and there in the market, until eventually evening came. [Sometimes they went to one cloth-seller's shop, sometimes to another. They looked at various kinds of fabric, they looked at silk and cotton, but nothing suited them.] The two arrived, by chance or deliberately, before a wine-house; and as if according to some prearranged decision, they went inside. For a little while they both stood there in a state of uncertainty. [Then Ghisu went to the counter and said, "Sir, please give us a bottle too."] *Ghisu bought one bottle of liquor, and some sesame sweets.* [After this some snacks came, fried fish came]. And they both sat down on the verandah and [peacefully] began to drink.

After drinking a number of cups in a row, both became elevated.

Ghisu said, "What's the use of wrapping her in a shroud? After all, it would only be burned. Nothing would go with her."

Looking toward the sky as if persuading the angels of his innocence, Madhav said, "It's the custom of the world-- why do these same people give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins? Who can tell whether a reward does or doesn't reach them in another world?"

"Rich people have wealth-- let them waste it! What do we have to waste?"

"But what will you tell people? Won't people ask where the shroud is?"

Ghisu laughed. "We'll say the money slipped out of my waistband-- we searched and searched for it, but it didn't turn up. [People won't believe it, but they'll still give the same sum again.]"

Madhav too laughed at this unexpected good fortune, *at defeating destiny in this way*. He said, "She was very good, the poor thing. Even as she died, she gave us a fine meal."

More than half the bottle had been finished. Ghisu ordered two measures of puris, a meat stew, and spiced liver and fried fish. There was a shop right next to the wine-house. Madhav ran over and brought everything back on two leaf-plates. The cost was fully one and a half rupees. Only a few pennies were left.

Both then sat eating puris, with all the majesty of a tiger in the jungle pursuing his prey. They had no fear of being called to account, nor any concern about disgrace. They had passed through these stages of weakness long ago. Ghisu said in a philosophical manner, "If my soul is being pleased, then won't she receive religious merit?"

Madhav bowed his head in pious confirmation. "Certainly she'll certainly receive it. Bhagwan, you are the knower of hearts-- take her to Heaven! We're both giving her our heartfelt blessing. The feast I've had today-- I haven't had its equal in my whole life!"

After a moment a doubt arose in Madhav's heart. He said, "How about it-- we'll go there too someday, won't we?"

Ghisu gave no answer to this childish question. *He looked reproachfully at Madhav.* [He didn't want the thought of heavenly matters to interfere with this bliss.]

"When she asks us, there, why we didn't give her a shroud, what will you say?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"She'll certainly ask."

"How do you know that she won't get a shroud? Do you consider me such a donkey? I've lived in this world for sixty years-- and have I just been loitering around? She'll get a shroud, and [a very good one]-- *a much better than we would have given*."

Madhav was not convinced. He said, "Who will give it? You've gobbled up the rupees! [It's me she'll ask-- I'm the one who put the sindur [red mark] in the parting of her hair.]"

Ghisu grew irritated. "I tell you, she'll get a shroud. Why don't you believe me?"

"Who will give the money-- why don't you tell me?"

"The same people will give it who gave it this time. But they won't put the rupees into our hands. *And if somehow we get our hands on them, we'll sit here and drink again just like this, and they'll give the shroud a third time.*"

As the darkness deepened and the stars glittered more sharply, the tumult in the wine-house also increased. One person sang, another babbled, another embraced his companion, another pressed a glass to his friend's lips. Joy was in the atmosphere there. Intoxication was in the air. How many people become 'an ass with a glass'! *They came here only to taste the pleasure of self-forgetfulness.* More than liquor, the air here elevated their spirits. The disaster of life seized them and dragged them here. And for a while they forgot whether they were alive or dead-- or half-alive.

And these two, father and son, were still sipping with relish. Everyone's eyes had settled on them. How fortunate they were! They had a whole bottle between them.

After he had finished eating, Madhav picked up the leaf-plate of leftover puris and gave it to a beggar who was standing there looking at them with hungry eyes. And for the first time in his life he felt the pride and delight and thrill of giving.

Ghisu said, "Take it-- eat your fill, and give her your blessing. She whose earnings these are has died, but your blessing will certainly reach her. Bless her with every hair on your body-- these are the payment for very hard labor."

Madhav again looked toward the sky and said, "She'll go to Heaven-- she'll become the Queen of Heaven!"

Ghisu stood up, and as if swimming in waves of joy he said, "Yes, son, she'll go to Heaven! She never tormented anyone, she never oppressed anyone; even while dying, she fulfilled the greatest desire of our lives. If she doesn't go to Heaven, then will those fat rich people go-- who loot the poor with both hands, and go to the Ganges to wash away their sin, and offer holy water in temples?"

This mood of piety too changed; variability is the special quality of intoxication. It was the turn of despair and grief. Madhav said, "But the poor thing suffered a great deal in her life. Even her death was so painful!" Covering his eyes with his hands, he began to weep, [and sobbed loudly].

Ghisu consoled him: "Why do you weep, son? Be happy that she's been liberated from this net of illusion. She's escaped from the snare; she was very fortunate that she was able to break the bonds of worldly illusion so quickly."

And both, standing there, began to sing, "Temptress! Why do your eyes flash, temptress?"

The whole wine-house was absorbed in the spectacle, and these two drinkers, deep in intoxication, kept on singing. Then they both began to dance-- they leaped and jumped, fell down, flounced about, gesticulated, [strutted around]; and finally, overcome by drunkenness, they collapsed.

Part II : LATE 20th CENTURY

Overview

The dynamics of change that had shaped culture in the first half of the century continued to operate in the second half. Only more so. Like its economy, Indian culture became more global. Artistic expression, religion, the cinema and literature were all deeply influenced by an increasing interaction with the West and by the countervailing desire to explore Indian 'tradition.' In effect, nationalism had divided Indian society into two realms: an inner, traditional core, and an outer, modernising layer. The two had to be kept separate, to prevent the uncolonised core from being contaminated by modernisation in the social, political and economic realms. The challenge, therefore, has been to find cultural expressions that are both 'Indian' and modern. That synthesis has been achieved in English-language Indian literature, whose novelists have won international awards and audiences, while other, less-known writers still sell millions of copies at home. In Indian-language literature, a noteworthy trend has been the success of Dalit (Untouchable) novelists.

Painting

Modern Indian painters of this period attempted to combine Indian decorativism and western naturalism. A good example was M.F. Husain (1915-2011), an eccentric and controversial artist who never maintained a studio, painted Hindu deities in the nude and owned a collection of vintage sports cars. For his synthesis, he borrowed the techniques of Cezanne and Matisse to paint scenes from the Hindu epics and myths. Another distinctive figure was Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2004), who drew inspiration from a variety of sources, both Indian and western. His openly homosexual themes were autobiographical and created controversy. However, his skill, particularly in rendering colour on flat surfaces, has earned his work a place in major museums around the world.

Cinema

Golden Age The 1950s saw the beginning of the 'Golden Age' for Indian cinema, when Indian-made films, including many classics, were produced. Bengali art cinema (directed by Ray, Sen, Roy and Ghatak) emerged and (especially Ray's films) gained an international audience. At the same time, domestic demand rose, and Hindi films were subtitled in three or four regional languages. Fan magazines flourished, and stars, such as Raj Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore, became celebrities. Almost as popular were the play-back singers, who sang mainly Urdu-language *qawwalis* and *ghazals*. During the 1970s, Hindi cinema began to draw heavily on

Industry Based in Bombay but borrowing techniques from Hollywood, the Indian film industry is a run-away financial success. Some production cost \$20 million, but the hits regularly bring in \$25 or 30 million. It is a populist medium, telling stories of romance, of good over evil and of rags to riches. Rickshaw drivers have a heart of gold, corrupt politicians are denounced and poor village girls marry nice doctors. Today India produces about 1,300 of these films every year, mostly in Hindi but with substantial numbers in Telugu and Tamil.

Politics Film in India has always been political. Before 1947, the colonial government banned films with a nationalist message. After Independence the moral character of the nation was portrayed in 'Mother India' (1957), in which the heroine faces hardships but is a self-sacrificing mother. The path from screen to politics was laid down when the female star of 'Mother India' was elected as a member of parliament in New Delhi. More recently, stars of Tamil cinema (MGR) and Telugu cinema (T.N. Rama Rao) have been elected chief ministers of their states.

Religion

Shiv Sena The harnessing of religion by political movements, a trend that began during the nationalist era, shows no sign of abating. A revealing example is the Shiv Sena ('Siva's Army'). This Hindu nationalist political party began as an agitation in the 1950s for a separate Marathi-speaking state to be carved out of Bombay Province. After Maharashtra was duly created in 1960, protests against non-Marathas began. The easy targets were Gujaratis, who controlled commerce in Bombay, and South Indians, who held professional positions. Later the Shiv Sena allied itself with the Bharatiya Janata Party and stoked anti-Muslim feelings.

Communal violence More broadly, the psychological divide between Hindus and Muslims has been deepened by the ongoing dispute over Kashmir and the threat of jihadism, especially following the attacks in Bombay in

2008. In 2002, Hindu activists clashed with Muslims in rural Gujarat, leaving two thousand Muslims dead, with the apparent complicity of Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat and later Prime Minister of India. New wealth has also enabled people to display their prosperity by building temples and mosques, which then act as lightning rods for conflict.

Literature

Nirmal Verma Nirmal Verma (1929-2005) was perhaps the most influential Hindi writer of his generation. A skilful novelist, he was also a founder of the 'new short story' movement in Hindi. He published twelve collections of stories, starting in 1959 with *Parinde* ('Birds'), whose title story is often cited as his best. Like so many of his contemporaries, Verma was active in politics and spent ten years in Prague as the guest of the Soviet-controlled government. He resigned from the Communist Party in 1956 after the invasion of Hungary..

C.S. Lakshmi C.S Lakshmi ('Ambai, b. 1944) is a feminist critic, scholar and author in Tamil. Her journalism ranges widely over current affairs, but she is best known for her short stories, especially *Cirukukal Muriyum* ('Wings will be Broken,' 1968) and *Vitin Mulaiyil oru Camaiyalarai* ('A Kitchen in the Corner of the House', 1988). Her stories are not distinguished by literary style, and neither are they humorous or original. Instead, they look uncompromisingly at the everyday reality of women, revealing both their vulnerability and their strength.

R. K. Narayan R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) dominated the field of Indian English fiction for most of the century. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Narayan was never a political writer, and his fiction is often criticised for its apolitical stance and avoidance of colonialism. However, he was too keen an observer of human nature to be indifferent to injustice. Most of his novels, in fact, explore social problems, though not the spectacular ones. His masterpiece is probably *The Guide* (1958), which is both a parody of Indian culture and a poignant love story.

Aravind Adiga The most recent Booker-winning novel by an Indian is *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga (b.1974). Written in the form of letters from its hero (Balram) to the Chinese Premier, 'from one entrepreneur to another,' as Balram says, it chronicles the effect of global capitalism in India. Balram himself, a poor village boy, goes to the big city and makes a success, but only by murdering and stealing along the way. Like R.K Narayan, Aravind Adiga has great fun in lampooning the official rhetoric of progress, but the bitter cynicism is a long way from Narayan's gentle irony.

Popular fiction Another strand altogether are the English-language novels by Shoba De (b. 1948) and Chetan Bhagat (b. 1974), which reflect the aspirations of a growing lower-middle class. De has published 17 novels, with titles such as *Starry Nights* and *Sultry Days*, that might be called 'soap opera literature.' If her novels tell the tale of middle-class women in contemporary India, Bhagat's describe the success story of young men. Novels by both writers are entertaining, youth-focused and extremely popular, selling in the millions and filling a (rather large) literary niche.

Dalit fiction Another kind of success story is the growing popularity of novels written by Dalits (formerly 'Untouchables') in regional languages. This trend began in 1978 with the Marathi-language *Balute* ('Share') by Daya Pawar and continued with several more novels in Marathi. One of the best, *Akkarmashi* ('Outcaste,' 1984) by Limbale, is the life-story of a bastard son born to a Dalit woman seduced by her landlord. Then came two Dalit novels in Tamil by Bama (b. 1958), *Karukku* ('Blades') in 1992 and *Sangati* ('Events') in 1994. *Karukku* tells the life-story of a Dalit Catholic woman in the idiom of her community rather than in standard Tamil. A major Hindi-language novel is *Joothan* ('Left Overs') published by Omprakash Valmiki in 1997, which dramatizes the lives of scavengers who subsist on what others throw away. Starting in the 1950s, the novel reveals the hollowness of Gandhian government programmes of Untouchable uplift.

Questions/Discussion

1. No matter how one theorises post-colonial literature in India, it is difficult to avoid the fact that the novel is an imported genre. Although it has developed in India for about 150 years and become indigenised, it remains unconnected to the deep historical patterns of literary culture in the country. That may explain why (with few exceptions) Indian novelists have yet to find a way to write historical novels that integrate the past into the present.

2. Cinema is perhaps India's best-known cultural export in a globalising world. But to what extent is it Indian? The technology and the early films themselves were borrowed from the west, and Bollywood continues to take inspiration from Hollywood. Explain these two seemingly contradictory dimensions of Indian cinema: its international scope and its local content.
3. Modern painting is an excellent window on the tricky synthesis of tradition and modernity in Indian culture more generally. A study of a handful of the acknowledged masters of painting since 1950 (M.F. Hussain, Amrita Sher-Gil, Bhupen Khakar, Jamini Roy, F.N. Souza) would be an original contribution to the analysis of contemporary Indian culture.
4. Religion in modern India is a complex combination of ancient texts and cultural practices in the context of growing global secularism. Some scholars have argued that these two forces are two sides of the same coin. The more India is exposed to a materialist and secular modern world, the more it retreats into a spiritual sanctuary. And, if it is secure in that interior, invented past, India can safely absorb more external, western influences.

Reading

- Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (Cambridge, 2012)
- Christopher Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, 2004)
- K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (eds.), *Popular Culture in a Globalised India* (Routledge, 2009)
- J.P. Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World Paperback* (Oxford, 2004)
- Gary Michael Tartakov (ed.), *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* (OUP Delhi, 2012)
- E. Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (OUP Delhi, 1980)
- Nasreen Munni Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story* (Channel 4, 2001)
- Selvaraj Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's other Film Industry* (Routledge, 2009)
- Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (eds.), *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora* (Anthem, 2011)
- Ulka Anjaria (ed.), *A History of the Indian Novel in English* (Cambridge, 2015)

Text

'A Devoted Son,' by Anita Desai

When the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them barefoot and in his pajamas, at the garden gate, then went up the steps to the verandah where his father sat sipping his morning tea and bowed down to touch his feet.

"A first division, son?" his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.

"At the top of the list, papa," Rakesh murmured, as if awed. "First in the country."

Bedlam broke loose then. The family whooped and danced. The whole day long visitors streamed into the small yellow house at the end of the road to congratulate the parents of this *Wunderkind*, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colors of a festival. There were garlands and halwa, party clothes and gifts (enough fountain pens to last years, even a watch or two), nerves and temper and joy, all in a multi-coloured whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened: Rakesh was the first son in the family to

receive an education, so much had been sacrificed in order to send him to school and then medical college, and at last the fruits of their sacrifice had arrived, golden and glorious.

To everyone who came to him to say “*Mubarak*, Varmaji, your son has brought you glory,” the father said, “Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet.” This moved many of the women in the crowd so much that they were seen to raise the ends of their saris and dab at their tears while the men reached out for the betel-leaves and sweetmeats that were offered around on trays and shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary filial behavior. “One does not often see such behavior in sons anymore,” they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps. Leaving the house, some of the women said, sniffing, “At least on such an occasion they might have served pure ghee sweets,” and some of the men said, “Don’t you think old Varma was giving himself airs? He needn’t think we don’t remember that he comes from the vegetable market himself, his father used to sell vegetables, and he has never seen the inside of a school.” But there was more envy than rancor in their voices and it was, of course, inevitable—not every son in that shabby little colony at the edge of the city was destined to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?

And that was only the beginning, the first step in a great, sweeping ascent to the radiant heights of fame and fortune. The thesis he wrote for his M.D. brought Rakesh still greater glory, if only in select medical circles. He won a scholarship. He went to the USA (that was what his father learnt to call it and taught the whole family to say—not America, which was what the ignorant neighbors called it, but, with a grand familiarity, “the USA”) where he pursued his career in the most prestigious of all hospitals and won encomiums from his American colleagues which were relayed to his admiring and glowing family. What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony, right at the end of the road where the rubbish vans tipped out their stinking contents for pigs to nose in and rag-pickers to build their shacks on, all steaming and smoking just outside the neat wire fences and well-tended gardens. To this Rakesh returned and the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father’s feet.

As for his mother, she gloated chiefly over the strange fact that he had not married in America, had not brought home a foreign wife as all her neighbors had warned her he would, for wasn’t that what all Indian boys went abroad for? Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl she had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled in like a charm, seemingly too lazy and too good-natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done. What was more, she was pretty—really pretty, in a plump, pudding way that only gave way to fat—soft, spreading fat, like warm wax—after the birth of their first baby, a son, and then what did it matter?

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital, quickly rising to the top of the administrative organization, and was made a director before he left to set up his own clinic. He took his parents in his car—a new, sky-blue Ambassador with a rear window full of stickers and charms revolving on strings—to see the clinic when it was built, and the large sign-board over the door on which his name was printed in letters of red, with a row of degrees and qualifications to follow it like so many little black slaves of the regent. Thereafter his fame seemed to grow just a little dimmer—or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown accustomed to it at last—but it was also the beginning of his fortune for he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this was not accomplished in the wink of an eye. Naturally not. It was the achievement of a lifetime and it took up Rakesh’s whole life. At the time he set up his clinic his father had grown into an old man and retired from his post at the kerosene dealer’s depot at which he had worked for forty years, and his mother died soon after, giving up the ghost with a sigh that sounded positively happy, for it was her own son who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne.

For it had to be admitted—and the most unsuccessful and most rancorous of neighbors eventually did so—that Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humor his wife and show concern equally for his children and his patients, but there was actually a brain inside this beautifully polished and formed body of good manners and kind nature and, in between ministering to his family and playing host to many friends and coaxing them all into feeling happy and grateful and content, he had actually trained his hands as well and emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon.

How one man—and a man born to illiterate parents, his father having worked for a kerosene dealer and his mother having spent her life in a kitchen—had achieved, combined and conducted such a medley of virtues, no one could fathom, but all acknowledged his talent and skill.

It was a strange fact, however, that talent and skill, if displayed for too long, cease to dazzle. It came to pass that the most admiring of all eyes eventually faded and no longer blinked at his glory. Having retired from work and having lost his wife, the old father very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim. He sat huddled on his string bed most of the day and developed an exasperating habit of stretching out suddenly and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to fly around him in a flap, wailing and weeping, and then suddenly sitting up, stiff and gaunt, and spitting out a big gob of betel-juice as if to mock their behavior.

He did this once too often: there had been a big party in the house, a birthday party for the youngest son, and the celebrations had to be suddenly hushed, covered up and hustled out of the way when the daughter-in-law discovered, or thought she discovered, that the old man, stretched out from end to end of his string bed, had lost his pulse; the party broke up, dissolved, even turned into a band of mourners, when the old man sat up and the distraught daughter-in-law received a gob of red spittle right on the hem of her organza sari. After that no one much cared if he sat up cross-legged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned gray as a corpse. Except, of course, for that pearl amongst pearls, his son Rakesh.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea, not in one of the china cups from which the rest of the family drank, but in the old man's favorite brass tumbler, and sat at the edge of his bed, comfortable and relaxed with the string of his pajamas dangling out from under his fine lawn night-shirt, and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from spitting. It was Rakesh, too, who, on returning from the clinic in the evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, as bare and desolate as a cell, and take the evening air out in the garden, beautifully arranging the pillows and bolsters on the divan in the corner of the open verandah. On summer nights he saw to it that the servants carried out the old man's bed onto the lawn and himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, soothing him and settling him down for a night under the stars.

All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was that he even undertook to supervise his father's diet. One day when the father was really sick, having ordered his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of *soojie halwa* and eaten it with a saucerful of cream, Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor, and declared, "No more *halwa* for you, papa. We must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little *kheer*, that's light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can't have this happening again."

The old man who had been lying stretched out on his bed, weak and feeble after a day's illness, gave a start at the very sound, the tone of these words. He opened his eyes—rather, they fell open with shock—and he stared at his son with disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? No, it was unheard of, it was incredible. But Rakesh had turned his back to him and was cleaning up the litter of bottles and packets on the medicine shelf and did not notice while Veena slipped silently out of the room with a little smirk that only the old man saw, and hated.

Halwa was only the first item to be crossed off the old man's diet. One delicacy after the other went—everything fried to begin with, then everything sweet, and eventually everything, everything that the old man enjoyed.

The meals that arrived for him on the shining stainless steel tray twice a day were frugal to say the least—dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables and, if there were a bit of chicken or fish, that was boiled too. If he called for another helping—in a cracked voice that quavered theatrically—Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and shake his head, saying, "Now, papa, we must be careful, we can't risk another illness, you know," and although the daughter-in-law kept tactfully out of the way, the old man could just see her smirk sliding merrily through the air. He tried to bribe his grandchildren into buying him sweets (and how he missed his wife now, that generous, indulgent and illiterate cook), whispering, "Here's fifty paise," as he stuffed the coins into a tight, hot fist. "Run down to the shop at the crossroads and buy me thirty paise worth of *jalebis*, and you can spend the remaining twenty paise on yourself. Eh? Understand? Will you do that?" He got away with it

once or twice but then was found out, the conspirator was scolded by his father and smacked by his mother and Rakesh came storming into the room, almost tearing his hair as he shouted through compressed lips, "Now papa, are you trying to turn my little son into a liar? Quite apart from spoiling your own stomach, you are spoiling him as well—you are encouraging him to lie to his own parents. You should have heard the lies he told his mother when she saw him bringing back those *jalebis* wrapped up in filthy newspaper. I don't allow anyone in my house to buy sweets in the bazaar, papa, surely you know that. There's cholera in the city, typhoid, gastroenteritis—I see these cases daily in the hospital, how can I allow my own family to run such risks?" The old man sighed and lay down in the corpse position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left in the old man now (his son's early morning visits and readings from the newspaper could no longer be called that) and those were visits from elderly neighbors. These were not frequent as his contemporaries were mostly as decrepit and helpless as he and few could walk the length of the road to visit him anymore. Old Bhatia, next door, however, who was still spry enough to refuse, adamantly, to bathe in the tiled bathroom indoors and to insist on carrying out his brass mug and towel, in all seasons and usually at impossible hours, into the yard and bathe noisily under the garden tap, would look over the hedge to see if Varma were out on his verandah and would call to him and talk while he wrapped his *dhoti* about him and dried the sparse hair on his head, shivering with enjoyable exaggeration. Of course these conversations, bawled across the hedge by two rather deaf old men conscious of having their entire households overhearing them, were not very satisfactory but Bhatia occasionally came out of his yard, walked down the bit of road and came in at Varma's gate to collapse onto the stone plinth built under the temple tree. If Rakesh was at home he would help his father down the steps into the garden and arrange him on his night bed under the tree and leave the two old men to chew betel-leaves and discuss the ills of their individual bodies with combined passion.

"At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you," sighed Bhatia, having vividly described his martyrdom to piles.

"Look after me?" cried Varma, his voice cracking like an ancient clay jar. "He—he does not even give me enough to eat."

"What?" said Bhatia, the white hairs in his ears twitching. "Doesn't give you enough to eat? Your own son?"

"My own son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says no, papa, I weighed it out myself and I can't allow you to have more than two hundred grams of cereal a day. He *weighs* the food he gives me, Bhatia—he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to."

"Never," murmured Bhatia in disbelief. "Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?"

"Let me tell you," Varma whispered eagerly. "Today the family was having fried fish—I could smell it. I called to my daughter-in-law to bring me a piece. She came to the door and said no. . . ."

"Said no?" It was Bhatia's voice that cracked. A *drongo bird* shot out of the tree and sped away. "No?"

"No, she said no, Rakesh has ordered her to give me nothing fried. No butter, he says, no oil. . . ."

"No butter? No oil? How does he expect his father to live?"

Old Varma nodded with melancholy triumph. "That is how he treats me—after I have brought him up, given him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors treat their fathers, Bhatia," for the son's sterling personality and character now underwent a curious sea change. Outwardly all might be the same but the interpretation had altered: his masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.

There was cold comfort in complaining to neighbors and, on such a miserable diet, Varma found himself slipping, weakening and soon becoming a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills and mixtures were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach but became a regular part of his diet—became his diet, complained Varma, supplanting the natural foods he craved. There were pills to regulate his bowel movements, pills to bring down his blood pressure, pills to deal with his arthritis and, eventually, pills to keep his heart beating. In between there were panicky rushes to the hospital, some humiliating experience with the

stomach pump and enema, which left him frightened and helpless. He cried easily, shriveling up on his bed, but if he complained of a pain or even a vague, gray fear in the night, Rakesh would simply open another bottle of pills and force him to take one. "I have my duty to you papa," he said when his father begged to be let off.

"Let me be," Varma begged, turning his face away from the pills on the outstretched hand. "Let me die. It would be better. I do not want to live only to eat your medicines."

"Papa, be reasonable."

"I leave that to you," the father cried with sudden spirit. "Leave me alone, let me die now, I cannot live like this."

"Lying all day on his pillows, fed every few hours by his daughter-in-law's own hand, visited by every member of his family daily—and then he says he does not want to live 'like this,'" Rakesh was heard to say, laughing, to someone outside the door.

"Deprived of food," screamed the old man on the bed, "his wishes ignored, taunted by his daughter-in-law, laughed at by his grandchildren—that is how I live." But he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was an incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain. Only once, when old Bhatia had come to see him and they sat together under the temple tree, they heard him cry, "God is calling me—and they won't let me go."

The quantities of vitamins and tonics he was made to take were not altogether useless. They kept him alive and even gave him a kind of strength that made him hang on long after he ceased to wish to hang on. It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break, it was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying.

In the evening, that summer, the servants would come into his cell, grip his bed, one at each end, and carry it out to the verandah, there sitting it down with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. In answer to his agonized complaints they said the doctor sahib had told them he must take the evening air and the evening air they would make him take—thump. Then Veena, that smiling, hypocritical pudding in a rustling sari, would appear and pile up the pillows under his head till he was propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache.

"Let me lie down," he begged. "I can't sit up any more."

"Try, papa, Rakesh said you can if you try," she said, and drifted away to the other end of the verandah where her transistor radio vibrated to the lovesick tunes from the cinema that she listened to all day.

So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket, in danger of getting one of their hard-spun balls in his eye, and at the gate that opened onto the dusty and rubbish-heaped lane but still bore, proudly, a newly touched-up signboard that bore his son's name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago.

At last the sky-blue Ambassador arrived, the cricket game broke up in haste, the car drove in smartly and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag from him, others to escort him up the steps. "Will you have tea?" his wife called, turning down the transistor set. "Or a Coca-Cola? Shall I fry you some *samosas*?" But he did not reply or even glance in her direction. Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken, at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son. But he stopped gobbling air with his uncontrolled lips and set his jaw as hard as a sick and very old man could set it.

"Papa," his son said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.

Old Varma tucked his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the yellow air of the summer evening.

“Papa, I’m home.”

Varma’s hand jerked suddenly, in a sharp, derisive movement, but he did not speak.

“How are you feeling, papa?”

Then Varma turned and looked at his son. His face was so out of control and all in pieces, that the multitude of expressions that crossed it could not make up a whole and convey to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him, his skill, his art.

“I’m dying,” he croaked. “Let me die, I tell you.”

“Papa, you’re joking,” his son smiled at him, lovingly. “I’ve brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, papa.”

Varma’s mouth worked as hard as though he still had a gob of betel in it (his supply of betel had been cut off years ago). Then he spat out some words, as sharp and bitter as poison, into his son’s face. “Keep your tonic—I want none—I want none—I won’t take any more of—of your medicines. None. Never,” and he swept the bottle out of his son’s hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective.

His son jumped, for the bottle was smashed and thick brown syrup had splashed up, staining his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running. All around the old man was hubbub once again, noise, attention.

He gave one push to the pillows at his back and dislodged them so he could sink down on his back, quite flat again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling.