

REALISM AND REALITY
The Novel and Society in India

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I

FROM PURANA TO NUTANA

A study of the emergence of the novel in India has to be more than a purely literary exercise. The factors that shaped the growth of this genre since the mid-nineteenth century arose as much from the political and social situation of a colonized country as from several indigenous though attenuated narrative traditions of an ancient culture that survived through constant mutation. English education and through English an exposure to western literature were by far the strongest influences at work. It is not an accident that the first crop of novels in India, in Bengali and Marathi, appeared exactly a generation after Macaulay's Educational Minutes making English a necessary part of an educated Indian's mental make-up were passed. Yet to regard the novel in India, as is sometimes done,¹ as purely a legacy of British rule—such as the railways or cricket—would be to overlook the complex cultural determinants of a literary genre.

When the novel assumed a distinct generic identity in Europe in the eighteenth century its form was quite different from that of the existing structures of earlier narrative such as the epic, the romance or the saga. Since the novel is the second-youngest major narrative genre today (the film being the youngest), there has been considerable critical and philosophical speculation in the West about why it emerged when it did and whether there was a historical inevitability about its emergence. The co-ordinates taken into consideration by critics as different as Hegel, Lukacs, Steiner, Watt and Todorov include economic and political factors as well as metaphysical assumptions about man's relationship with time, with nature and with other human

beings. Formal realism, regarded as one of the determining characteristics of the novel in its early stage, reflected a basic shift in man's view of reality. Of the many theories about the rise of the novel in the West the two major theories emphasize the novel's close connection with the changing economic and moral bases of society and, as we shall see, its members' awareness of the temporal and spatial axes of reality.

Stripped to its essence, one theory may be said to attribute the rise of this genre to the growth of the bourgeoisie and modern capitalism.² That is, the novel is said to be a genre generated and sustained by the middle class in a very broad sense, and to incorporate the values of this class as against the feudal values of the epic or romance. While the epic hero's fate was linked with the destiny of his community and the romance hero followed a predetermined heroic or chivalric code, the protagonist of the novel has to make a choice which is distinctly his own. The second theory suggests a link between the emergence of the idea of individualism and the rise of the novel.³ But this concept of individualism can also be related to the new social mobility that industrialization made possible, displacing man from his secure traditional niche, making him realize the unique potential of each human being, including himself, outside social hierarchy. These two theories are thus not unrelated.

All this is evident to any student of the novel in the West. But how much of this can be transferred to a different cultural and historical context when we study the novel in India? Is it possible to say that industrialization or the rise of the middle class need not be a necessary precondition for the new form because Banabhatta's *Kadambari* was written in Sanskrit in the seventh century and because tenth-century Japan produced the long narrative in prose fiction well known in English translations as *The Tales of Genji*? *Don Quixote*, a much more direct ancestor of the European novel, was written in 1605 in a pre-industrial Spain steeped in feudal values. The crux of the problem may lie in deciding upon a set of defining characteristics of the novel which are valid across cultures. However, in the two-and-a-half centuries or more that have elapsed since the novel was recognized as a distinct genre, it has become

increasingly clear that this is the most flexible and elusive of genres, almost impossible to tackle through definitions. The most one can attempt is to describe some of the obvious differences between this genre and earlier forms of narrative.

In pre-novel narratives, for example, *Kadambari*, *Panchatantra*, *Arabian Nights*, *The Tales of Genji*, *Legends of King Arthur*, *Decameron* or *Canterbury Tales*, the narrative structure is often circular—i.e. either there is a larger story which contains a smaller one which in turn contains another and so on, or a number of shorter tales are strung together in the larger thread of the central narrative. In *Kadambari* Shudraka listens to the account of the Suka bird; the Suka bird listens to Maharishi Jabali's story which contains Mahashveta's story within it. Such cycles or chain tales have existed in almost every language, though not always in prose, and have been variously called sagas or romances. The Persian word *daastan*, later carried over to Urdu, denotes similar cycles of medieval tales of heroism where a succession of episodes follow one another in endless profusion. Compared to these the structure of the novel is more or less unified. The events grow organically out of each other instead of being loosely strung together through a common thread. On the whole the progression is linear rather than cyclic, even though the order of past and present may occasionally be reversed.

The consciousness of time and space is a special feature of the novelist's apprehension of reality. The pre-novel tales have a 'once-upon-a time' ambience where the tensions of time past and time present are absent. Instead of dealing with the unchanging moral verities of life in the abstract, the novelist depicts situations on spatial and temporal axes, employing realism as one of the viable modes of viewing this concrete human reality. Medieval tales could be borrowed by one culture from another (Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, for example, can be traced to the Jataka stories) but a novel is necessarily bound by its historical and geographical co-ordinates. An organic product of a specific environment in a particular society at a given point of history, the novel crosses the frontiers of culture less easily than a fable or an allegory.

The third important distinction between the novel on the one hand and fable, legend and all other traditional narratives on the other lies in characterization, which is 'life-like' in the one and stylized in the other. The archetypes of the hero, the heroine and the villain of the romance have been seen by Northrop Frye as the reflections of Jung's libido, anima and shadow respectively. Frye says that 'a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its [the romance's] fringes',⁴ whereas in a novel the characters are seen not as representatives of either a class or of moral values but as specific individuals who are required to be convincing in the context of a given time and culture.

II

A whole new world became available to educated Indians in the middle of the nineteenth century through their study of English literature. The society represented in the novels of Scott, Dickens and Thackeray was very different from the society Indians knew and lived in, which in turn was already different from the traditional agrarian life of previous generations which had been the stable cultural background — a background which the extension of British rule had partially disrupted. Since the early novels in India were all written in urban areas by English-educated people (this remains true even today), this discontinuity was indeed a vital issue. It was responsible for their inability to find a fictional form suitable for the new city society, a form which simultaneously allowed novelists to employ, without doing violence to the reality of mid-nineteenth century 'Indian life', the realist mode learnt from the Victorian novel. More influential than Dickens and Thackeray were popular Victorian novelists like Wilkie Collins, Marie Corelli, Benjamin Disraeli, Bulwer Lytton, and a now-forgotten manufacturer of bestsellers called G.W.M. Reynolds. Moth-eaten copies of books by these writers can be found in almost every family library in India which goes back to the nineteenth century. Not all these British novelists used the realist mode, but for the nineteenth-century Indian it was not

very easy to distinguish precisely between fictional modes when the life depicted was so unfamiliar. Colourful, expansive, free—the characters in the work of these novelists seemed to lead lives of infinite possibilities, while the life of the nineteenth-century Indian—politically servile, economically deprived and socially circumscribed—seemed to them limited in comparison.

The picaresque tradition in the European novel had achieved one main purpose—it had liberated the protagonist from the rigidity of a static society into being a free agent who could to some extent shape his own destiny. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Moll Flanders* (1722), *Pamela* (1740), three early examples of the English novel, show how the central character is in each case an active rather than a passive agent challenging his or her fate. The Indian novelist had to operate in a tradition-bound society where neither a man's profession nor his marriage was his personal affair. His life was mapped out by his family or his community or his caste. In the rigidly hierarchical familial and social structure of nineteenth-century India, individualism was not an easy quality to render in literature. One of the problems of the early novelist was to reconcile two sets of values—one obtained by reading an alien literature and the other available in life. It may be relevant here to quote two passages where two nineteenth-century novelists try to rationalize their predicaments. The first passage is from the introduction to a Marathi novel, *Manjughosha* (1868), written by Naro Sadashiv Risbud, who opts out of the realist mode altogether:

Because of our attitude to marriage, and for several other reasons, one finds in the lives of us Hindus neither interesting vices nor virtues, and this is the difficulty which we find in trying to write novels. If we write about the things we experience daily, there would be nothing enthralling about them, so that if we set out to write an interesting book we are forced to take up with the marvellous . . .⁵

The second passage is taken from the dedication of O. Chandu Menon's Malayalam novel, *Indulekha* (1888), where there is a more direct reference to the essential hurdle—writing in a form that requires individualism as a value and writing about a society that denies it:

As stated at the outset, my object is to write a novel after the English fashion, and it is evident that no ordinary Malayalie lady can fill the role of the heroine in such a story. My Indulekha is not, therefore, an ordinary Malayalie lady.⁶

This author however goes on to add that if an Indulekha ever became possible she would be found among the educated Nair women of Malabar who enjoyed (perhaps because of matrilineal property laws) more freedom than most Indian women. The novel thus projects into the future rather than reflects a society known to the author:

Twenty years hence there may be found hundreds of Indulekhas in Malabar who would be able to choose their husbands for pure and sweet love. My narrative of the love and courtship of Madhavan is intended to show to the young ladies of Malabar how happy they can be if they can have the freedom to choose their partners.⁷

Indulekha actually ended up doing a lot more than what the author naively proposed in his preface and dedication. Starting as a professed adaptation of a second-rate Victorian novel (Disraeli's *Henrietta Temple*), it turned out to be the first major novel in Malayalam. This text is a good example of how despite self-perceived shortcomings and a rhetoric of humility a writer can transcend his limited model through a firm grasp of the milieu and time to which he belongs.

But the man-woman relationship, one of the staples of the European novel, presented the most persistent obstacle to the Indian writer who lived in a society bound by extremely restrictive conventions of marriage. Where girls were married off by their parents before puberty and marriage was a social institution rather than an act of individual choice, there was very little scope for romantic pre-marital love of the kind depicted in the English novels being read by the educated urban Indians. Love could be shown in an indigenous setting only in historical romances where the demands of realism were absent. The other alternative was a depiction of illicit love, but this involved the subsidiary problem of juxtaposing individual aspiration and the stability of the social order. In the novels of Bankimchandra Chatterji (1838-94) this conflict between rebellious passion and the accepted social norm sometimes

becomes a central concern (for example in *Krisbnakanter Will* and *Visba Vriksba*), but even at the cost of the artistic integrity of the novel Bankim had to accede that the demands of social order were higher. This was consistent with the other effect of English education, namely the desire to reform Hindu society or at least purge it of its excesses. There is otherwise enough evidence of free love between man and woman in ancient as well as in medieval India—as preserved in poetry or carved on stone.

A steadfast consciousness of the present is another prerequisite of concrete characterization, because characters in a novel, unlike in myth or romance or epic, exist within a specific time. The awareness of history as an irrevocable process was a relatively recent phenomenon even in the nineteenth-century West. Ancient Greece had developed the spatial sense, and the past in the classical world was of value merely as an accretion of independent events which were complete in themselves. Post-Renaissance Europe began to see an organic quality in the process of history, with one state formed out of another. The development of the European novel coincided with the emergence of this dynamic view of time, and the structure of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European novels was indirectly based on the idea of a linear and sequential progression of events that happened along a temporal axis.

This brings us to the question of time, rather of the operation of time within the narrative structure. Mythic time is necessarily different from historic time. While the latter operates in a novel, the narrative structure of conventional *kavya* works reveals all time as part of a cosmic cycle. Not too much emphasis can however be given to this contrast in a study of the novel in India, because nineteenth-century Indian writers were influenced largely by western concepts. Their conscious models were Scott's and Thackeray's novels rather than *Bribatkatha* or *Kadambari*, *Dasakumaracharita* or *Kathasaritsagara*. Yet the unconscious influence of these works, of the puranic tradition, of oral narratives and the memory of episodes from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* on which the imagination of most Indian writers was sustained, cannot be ignored altogether.⁸ A concept

of time that does not put too high a premium on the progress of events or the uniqueness of each moment will in some way affect the novelist's apprehension of reality. It is possible to argue that realism, a characteristic technique of the novel from Defoe to Balzac, reflects a particular world-view at a certain phase in human history. The fidelity to actuality involves a focusing on the immediate, the here and now, on details of the visual world, on specific human action and its verifiable consequences. Indian literature did not have any tradition of this variety of realism because it was based on a rather different view of reality. Even when the nineteenth-century Indian writer started consciously to emulate the western writer, interest in the palpable surface of physical reality was slow to evolve. Descriptions of the sky or a sunset or a landscape are often found as stylized set pieces in these early novels as well as the elaborate *nakha-sikha* (literally, 'from toe nail to the top of the head') reports of the heroine's beauty in the Sanskrit *kavya* convention. But a realistic presentation of actual people or objects, interiors or buildings, was either absent or rare. Without going as far as V. S. Naipaul,⁹ who theorizes that Indians are impervious to external details and who cites various examples to show how outer reality is used in Indian writing merely to preserve the continuity of the self, one can suggest that in the Indian literary tradition the perceptible surface of reality never had the same value as in Defoe or George Eliot, Balzac or Tolstoy. It is not surprising therefore that the two eighteenth-century novels most popular among the early generation English-educated Indians were *Rasselas* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*—both of which emphasized moral qualities rather than narrated amoral adventures in the realistic settings of Defoe and Fielding.

Thus the determinants of a literary form can be non-literary. Even religion can influence genre, as Edward Said has pointed out in a different context. Speculating on the absence of novels in the Arabic language until the present century he writes:

There was no tradition out of which these modern works developed; basically at some point writers in Arabic became aware of European novels and began to write like them. Obviously, it is not that simple.

Nevertheless, it is significant that a desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view. The Prophet is he who has *completed* a world-view; thus the word *heres* in Arabic is synonymous with the verb 'to innovate', 'to begin'.¹⁰

The situation in India was quite different from the one suggested above, but Said's observation reinforces what has been argued so far—namely that unexpected extra-literary factors contribute to the emergence of a literary form or retard its development. Increasing interaction among cultures of the modern world has made it progressively difficult to attempt isolating such factors.¹¹ Even categorical distinctions between what is Indian and what is western in literature is fraught with danger. All that we can do is note the differences in given conditions, so that in the analysis of actual texts different literary consequences may seem less strange or inexplicable.

III

While conceding that the authentically modern writer in the twentieth century often chooses not to respect the separation between literary genres, Tzvetan Todorov has observed: 'It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as horizons of expectation for readers and as models of writing for authors.'¹² Europe's more stratified nineteenth-century thought is bound to have communicated its respect for genres to contemporary Indians who came in touch with them. But were those who wrote our early novels conscious of founding a new genre in Indian literature? Did their readers immediately recognize it as such and adjust their expectations accordingly? Neither the word 'novel' nor any of its Indian equivalents was applied to either *Yamuna Paryatan* (Marathi; 1857) or *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (Bengali; 1858), although in retrospect we can recognize in these works the beginnings of a new literary form. The word *upanyas*, now current in many north Indian languages as a synonym for 'novel', was first used in 1862 in Bengali by Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay when he named a volume containing two long

tales set in the past as *Aitibastik Upanyas* (Bengali; 1862). The title could be translated as 'Historical Fiction', although the history contained in the tales does not claim to be verifiable. As for the word 'upanyas', which is of Sanskrit origin—meaning some statement properly presented or arranged in an orderly manner (even today in Telugu the word does not mean 'novel' but refers to a discourse or a speech)—it had never been used before to signify a long prose narrative. So when Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay employed the word he was obviously trying to coin a term for a new category of story. One wonders whether he was aware of the contemporary importance of his casual coinage—the tales he presented under this label do not appear to have been consciously modelled on European lines—and of its future utility. By the time Bankim began writing his novels in the mid-1860s, the term 'upanyas' was already well established in Bengali and about to be taken over in Hindi as well, as we note from the title *Manohar Upanyas* of a work of fiction published in 1871.¹³

In Marathi on the other hand the term which came to be used for the novel is *kadambari*, and the novelist is called a *kadambari-kar*. Such usage obviously pays tribute to Banabhatta's *Kadambari* and acknowledges it as the first literary work in this genre, an example of a name (such as xerox or frigidaire today) converted into a common noun. The use of the word 'kadambari' in this sense pre-dates the term 'upanyas' because a Marathi dictionary compiled in 1829 under the sponsorship of Montstuart Elphinstone lists 'kadambari' as meaning a fictional narrative in prose.¹⁴ From Marathi the term passed on to Kannada.

Urdu resolved the matter differently. When Ratan Nath Sharshar published his *Fasana-i-Azad* (1868), he claimed that this work was something wholly unprecedented in Urdu fiction and he called it a *naval*. Since the English word 'novel' for this form implied newness as a feature of the form, the word 'naval' for the Urdu novel—with its approximation in sound as well as sense—was a happy choice. Gujarati extended this choice further by adapting the term *naval-katha*, which combined the element of newness with a reminder of tradition evoked by the

Sanskrit word 'katha' (meaning story). Tamil and Malayalam have borrowed the English term itself. So has Telugu, although early Telugu novels like Narahari Gopalakrishnaiah Setty's *Sri Rangaraja Charitram* (1872) and Kandukuri Veerasalingam's *Rajasekbara Charitram* (1878) were known as 'vachana prabandha', a loose translation of which could be 'prose fiction'.

These differences in terminology do not really matter because whatever term for the novel was adopted in an Indian language, the formal and thematic aspirations of the early Indian novel were the same as those of the English novels read by pioneering Indian novelists. The English-educated generation which came of age in India around 1860 was brought up on British Victorian novels of the time and seems to have been influenced by these. Although Lukacs has insisted that 'the primary determinants of such influences are the literary requirements of the recipient country',¹⁵ sometimes the issue was determined by what English novels were actually available in India. The writers most often translated into Indian languages were Wilkie Collins, Disraeli and Reynolds among the Victorians, and Bunyan, Johnson and Goldsmith among the older writers. The popularity of some of these writers in India apparently continued even into the following century. Recounting his Bloomsbury experiences Mulk Raj Anand has recalled Virginia Woolf saying to him that she always thought the only popular writers were Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells, but her husband—who had been a civil servant in Ceylon—said he knew all the while that the really popular writers were W.M. Reynolds and Marie Corelli, 'the low-brow fodder...on which the subalterns chew their cud in cantonments of the empire'.¹⁶

The motivating impulse of the early writers of fiction in India varied greatly. The earliest long prose-narrative in Hindi in the nineteenth century, *Rani Ketaki ki Kahani* (1801) by Insha Allah Khan, was written as a linguistic experiment. The author wanted to show that a story could be written in a language which was neither Persianized Urdu nor a localized dialect of Hindi. The form was incidental, the language was the

challenge. There was no European influence here, nor did the book generate any further experiments to begin a tradition.

In 1868 the Gujarati writer Nandshankar Tuljashankar Mehra wrote in the introduction to his historical romance, *Karana Gbelo*: 'The former education inspector of our State [Surat] Mr Russel has expressed to me his desire to see Gujarati books written along the lines of English novels and romances. I have written this novel according to that plan.'¹⁷ He was not the only one who followed the initiative provided by a British official. The first Telugu novel was written as a response to Lord Mayo's announcement of a prize to a prose fiction 'depicting the customs and traditions of society'.¹⁸ Many of these early works of fiction owed their origin and survival to official patronage. British officers often helped the authors by prescribing the works as textbooks, thereby ensuring sales, by awarding cash prizes or by arranging for bulk purchase. Pandit Gauri Dutt, the author of *Devrani Jethani ki Kabani* (Hindi; 1870), acknowledges with gratitude his debt to Mr M. Kempson, the Director of Public Instruction, who bought two hundred copies, and to the Lt. Governor who gave him a prize of Rs 100. British officials also helped by undertaking translations. The same Mr Kempson translated Nazir Ahmad's Urdu moral tale *Tabut-un-Nusub* into English as *The Repentance of Nusooob* in 1884. Nazir Ahmad's earlier novel *Mirat-ul-Arus* (1869) was translated into English by a retired civil servant, G. E. Ward, as *The Bride's Mirror*. *Indulekha* (Malayalam; 1888) was translated into English by John W. F. Dumergue, a civil servant in the Madras Presidency.

In some cases the motivating impulse was simply to provide instruction and delight. Nazir Ahmad, in the preface to his first Urdu book, *Mirat-ul-Arus*, explains that he wrote it to provide his daughters with interesting reading material because they had nothing but sacred texts to read:

Purely religious subjects of study are not suited to the capacities of children, and the literature to which my children's attention was restricted had the effect of depressing their spirits, of checking their natural instincts and of blunting their intelligence ... It was then I formed the design of the present tale.¹⁹

Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai, in the preface to the first Tamil novel, *Prathapa Mudaliar Charitram* (1879), stated his

didactic intentions clearly: 'My object in writing this work of fiction is to supply the want of prose works in Tamil... and also to give a practical illustration of the maxims of morality'.²⁰ Bankim did not discuss his intentions in the prefatory matter of any of his early novels. His narrative style and authorial intrusions testify to his having read Scott and Thackeray, but in sonorous passages of nature description and evocations of feminine beauty, conventions of Sanskrit literature are also evident. In almost every major novel of the nineteenth century, behind the obvious European influences can be found the bedrock of a different narrative structure and value systems. Chandu Menon, who proclaimed in the Introduction to *Indulekha* his desire to write in Malayalam a realistic novel 'in the English style', forgot the intention by the time he finished the story. The concluding lines echo the sentiments with which the oral recital of a purana traditionally ends: 'All the characters mentioned... have reached the summit of human happiness, and now may God bless us and all who read this tale.'²¹ The last line of this passage reveals the persistence of the pre-novel conventions of narrative in spite of the author's conscious adoption of the European mode and his deliberate debunking of the mythic imagination (see Appendix II).

On the kaleidoscopic fictional scene in nineteenth-century India it is not easy to impose any pattern. The novel did not develop at the same pace in every language, nor was the influence of English evident to the same degree. Considering the fact that the trading centres at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras had an earlier and greater exposure to western ways of life and thought than other parts of India and considering that the three universities in India were established simultaneously in these cities in 1858, at least in Bengali, Marathi and Tamil the development of modern literature should have followed similar lines. But in actual fact the variables were many more than the common factors, and these lay in the religious, cultural and political arenas. While differences in literary trends in different languages are considerable, certain common patterns also become perceptible if we allow for a time lag in the develop-

ment of these patterns in different regions. There was a sudden spurt of long narrative fiction in most Indian languages in the second half of the nineteenth century, whether these were called *upanyas*, *kadambari*, *naval-katha* or novel, and at least three dominant strands can be sorted out from the tangled skein. The first strand consists of the novels of purpose which utilized this new literary form for social reform and missionary enterprise. The second is an inclusive category where the apparently opposed tendencies of historical and supernatural fiction merge, the common denominator being the creation of an ethos remote in time. The third strand attempted to render contemporary Indian society realistically in fiction, joining the European novelists 'in that effort, that willed tendency of art to approximate reality.'²² This was perhaps the most important strand and it subsequently came to form the mainstream along which the Indian novel developed in the twentieth century, although the other two streams have never been invisible for too long. These streams are discussed separately in the three subsequent chapters and a few representative texts analysed from each, but in actual fact these often overlapped and merged.

IV

In recalling the difficulties faced by nineteenth-century Indian novelists in their attempt to adapt an imported form to suit indigenous requirements, an important point remains to be made: the late emergence of prose literature in almost all the modern Indian languages. Until fairly late in the eighteenth century, literature in India was almost synonymous with verse composition.

Pramatha Chaudhuri (1868–1948), a Bengali writer with a flair for succinct and witty phrasing, once said that when the British came, rhyme gave way to reason. The development of prose in many regions—at least around Calcutta, Bombay and Madras—happened at the initiative of Christian missionaries who set up printing presses to produce material in regional languages. Before this, verse had reigned supreme for centuries

in most Indian compositions, not only in imaginative literature but also in astrological, medical, biographical and philosophical texts. Even until quite late, handbooks on homeopathy, texts of legal procedures and mathematical calculations were, in Bengali, available in verse.

Sunitikumar Chatterji regards the year 1800 as a pivotal one as far as the development of prose writing in most Indian languages is concerned. In Bengali, earlier prose was in the form of letters and documents. Therefore when the first Bengali novels emerged in the 1850s they were written in a medium forged not very long ago. The possibilities of fiction in the new medium were still largely untried. In Marathi there was an earlier tradition of prose writing by the Mahanubhav sect going back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but the language in which Marathi novels came to be written in the mid-nineteenth century had its beginning only in the same century. The first essays in novel writing in India entailed a two-fold adventure: experimenting to create a narrative form previously not part of the Indian literary heritage, and writing in a medium hitherto largely untested as a mode of literary expression. Compounding all these difficulties was the basic fact that the novel developed in India first in a colonial situation where the absolute superiority of everything published in English was taken for granted. It is perhaps unfortunate that the nineteenth-century Indian novelist had as his model primarily the British Victorian novel; with hindsight after a century it seems the British model was perhaps the least suitable for the Indian mind in the nineteenth century. The brooding inwardness and philosophical quality of the nineteenth-century Russian novel or the intensely moral preoccupation of the nineteenth-century American writer might have demonstrated to early practitioners of Indian fiction alternative modes of writing novels. A number of creative writers in our own time have remarked how little they have been influenced by English literature and how much by European and American literature, and of late by Latin American literature.²³

India's first generation novelists had hardly any access to Tolstoy, Melville or Flaubert. With total servility they imitated

mediocre English novels, often devaluing their own talents in the process. Mention has already been made of O. Chandu Menon trying to adapt a novel (which has almost been forgotten today) by Disraeli and ending up writing a genuine first novel in Malayalam. Harinarain Apte, the first major novelist of Marathi, thought it worth his while to translate a rather trivial novel called *The Seamstress* by G.W.M. Reynolds. Bengali critics foisted the epithet 'the Scott of Bengal' upon Bankim as a supreme honour, while in actual fact Bankim as a novelist, if not as a historical novelist, is more complex and original than Scott. Realism came to be held as the highest mode of perception (see Appendix II) and a good word from the English press the highest conceivable reward. Pearychand Mitra, author of a remarkable early novel in Bengali, cherished ambitions of being published in England but was fortunately dissuaded by his friend E.B. Cowell. Pearychand's son Chunilal Mitra wrote a satiric sketch along the lines of his father's *Alaler Gbarer Dulal* and called it *Kolikatar Nukochuri (Hide and Seek in Calcutta)* (1869), but also felt compelled to call it *Mysteries of Calcutta* in English on the title page. This consciously echoed Reynolds whose multi-volume *Mysteries of London* was very popular reading in nineteenth-century India.

However, in spite of the limitations of the model, in spite of basic incompatibilities between the English and the Indian temperaments, the novel in India which began under English tutelage soon began to acquire its own distinctive character. Without attempting to arrive at any definition of the Indian novel, it will be our purpose to examine the synthesis of a borrowed literary form and indigenous aesthetic—as well as cultural expectations—in order to determine the extent to which the form has undergone mutation in the process.

II

PILGRIM PROSE AND THE NOVEL OF PURPOSE

While acknowledging that the development of the novel in India is an indirect result of the spread of English education and consequent exposure to Victorian literature, we tend to overlook the fact that the prose in which the early Indian novels came to be written was also shaped to some extent by European colonial enterprise. Not only was an appropriate prose medium brought into being, means were also devised to produce prose works in multiple copies for wider circulation.¹

In this connection the establishment of the Serampore Mission Press in 1800, William Carey's association with it, and the founding of the Fort William College in the same year formed a conjunction of crucial importance. At Serampore Carey enlisted the help of Indian scholars—Ramram Basu for Bengali, Atmaram Sarma for Assamese, Vaijnath Sharma for Marathi, among many others—to translate the Bible into Indian languages. Sometime earlier, Bengali as well as Persian characters had been designed and cast into type by Charles Wilkins, an officer of the East India Company, and the first Bengali books had already been printed²—these being legal codes. Fort William College decided to teach 'Oriental' languages (which included Arabic and Persian) to the newly arrived officers of the Company, and Indian language writers were recruited for this purpose by the College. Thus, missionary enterprise in Indian languages was supported by administrative efforts.

As far as the evolution of literary prose was concerned the missionary efforts seemed at first to lead up a blind alley. It is well known that although the Bible was translated into many Indian languages by the early years of the nineteenth century,

none of the translations had much literary value. The magic of the Authorized Version (1611) in English, which was also a translation, was never repeated in an Indian language. The use of prose for literary purposes was not very common at this time in India, hence the translators had to forge a new medium as they went along. Not being particularly creative or imaginative (they were either enthusiastic missionaries or erudite scholars in the local languages), the nuances and poetic possibilities of the language eluded them. The stiff quaintness of Christian prose would later become a proverbial butt of ridicule in most Indian languages.

Secular prose got off to a better start, and some of the earliest Bengali works of prose fiction—such as Ramram Basu's *Pratapaditya-charitra* (1801) or Mrityunjay Tarkalankar's *Prabodha chandrika* (1833)—were written to provide the Fort William College students with reading matter. Dr John Gilchrist of the College collected Urdu and Hindi writers from different parts of North India, and the best known Urdu prose narrative written for text book use by the college is *Bagh-O-Babar* by Mir Amman (1801). This was written in a simple style, later called 'Fort William Urdu', which was looked down upon by the literati in and around Delhi and Lucknow as a style too direct and functional to be literary. The Hindi pundits that Gilchrist brought to Calcutta came to be called *bbakha munshis* because 'the word bhasa or bhaka (meaning language) had been used loosely by the Muslims of northern India to denote the various Hindi dialects.'³ Hindi was not yet a standardized language; Brajghosa and Avadhi were rich in poetic tradition, but Khari-boli was what the bhakha munshis were advised to develop. We are told that Gilchrist had a preference for the use of Arabic and Persian vocabulary in Hindi. But when Capt. William Price took charge of this department of the College in 1824 he emphasized Hindi rather than 'Hindustani' (Hindi mingled with Urdu).⁴ Writers like Laloo Lal (1763–1835) and Sadal Mishra (1768–1848) produced translations as well as some original works. Laloo Lal's *Premasagar* (first publication probably in 1802) and Sadal Mishra's *Nasiketopakhyān* (1803) are among the earliest publications in Hindi prose. Only the

celebrated *Rani Ketaki ki Kabani* (1801) by Insha Allah Khan was written outside the Fort William orbit and missionary ambience.

The Bible apart, translating *Pilgrim's Progress* appears to have been one of the commonest and most popular missionary activities in every part of India. The Tamil translation appeared as early as 1793, the Kannada rendering in 1841, the Malayalam in 1845; the Assamese translation, entitled *Yatrikarar Yatra*, was serialized in the Baptist Mission periodical *Arunodoy* which started in the 1830s. The Marathi version by Hari Keshav, entitled *Yatrik Kraman*, is said to have inspired Baba Padmanji's *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857), an early novel in Marathi.

Thus it is possible to regard the fiction written by Christians—whether originally so or converts—as a recognizable product of mid-nineteenth-century India. Among the early crop were *Pbukmoni-O-Karunar Bibaran* by Hannah Catherine Mullens in Bengali (1852), the earlier mentioned *Yamuna Paryatan* in Marathi, and *The Slayer Slain* by Mrs Collins in English (1864–6; translated into Malayalam in 1877). The first two are sometimes hailed as the very first novels of these languages; the third when translated achieved this status for Malayalam. Similar claims have been made for *Kamini Kanta* (1877; Assamese) written by G. S. Gurney, a Christian missionary, and for *Prathapa Mudaliar Charitram* (1879; Tamil) by Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai, a third generation Christian. If not the first novel, *Sukumari* (1897), an early Malayalam novel by Joseph Muliyl, seeks to demonstrate the benefits available to Indians by converting to Christianity.

The whole body of such works constitutes Christianity's contribution to the development of the novel in India. A comparative discussion of the themes and their presentation in some of these novels will enable us to assess the nature of this contribution.

II

Hannah Catherine Mullens, who lived and died in Calcutta (1824–67), and Mrs Collins of Kottayam (d. 1862) were

contemporaries whose lives ran roughly parallel courses more than a thousand miles apart, although they could not have been aware of each others' existence. They were daughters and wives of well-known English missionaries⁵ and devoted their lives to helping their husbands in the work of proselytizing and educating Indians, as Jane Eyre would have done had she married St John Rivers. Mrs Mullen's brief biography attached to her book reads like a page out of a Victorian novel: the devoted daughter and dutiful wife whose endless task of child-bearing and social obligation in a hostile climate is punctuated by the secret pleasures of reading and writing—secret because her stern father thought writing was an indulgence and because she herself thought she derived too much pleasure from these activities. One is reminded of Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a fictional contemporary of Mrs Mullens, who 'enjoyed riding so much in a pagan and sensuous way' that she always looked forward to renouncing it. Not too much of this pleasure, however, is evident in the utilitarian tone of her book—*Phulmoni-O-Karunar Bibaran*—which was written 'for the education of the native Christian women'.

Mrs Collins' book *The Slayer Slain* on the other hand shows a deeper awareness of the physical reality in which her moral tale is set. The landscape and atmosphere of Kerala is evoked in concrete detail—the splash of an oar as a visitor approaches the house, the swish of wind through paddy fields, the shade of the mango tree under which children sit on reed mats and squeeze juice out of ripe mangoes, the yard of the landlord's house lush with tendrils of yam climbing jack trees, yellow flowers of the pumpkin and cucumber, 'deep purple leaves of the *cheeras* standing in contrast to the green ridge of *goorkas*'. Mrs Collins' novel is full of the kind of particularization and naming of specific objects that is seldom to be found in the early fiction written by Indians for similar instructive purposes. She was employing a western realistic mode in her handling of Indian material, whereas in traditional narrative fiction descriptions of landscape or nature tend to appear in a stylized manner, more to satisfy literary convention than as the actual observation of specific detail. Mrs Collins is so preoccupied with the flora of

tropical India that she occasionally digresses from her main narrative to comment on wild flowers never found in gardens, and exhorts her reader—

while we gaze and admire the festoons of the climbing yam, or the massive vegetation that overtops the chana, one cannot but regret that the gay and lovely flowers which adorn and beautify the homes of the bulky elephant and creep round the den of the fierce tiger find no fostering hand of man. The lovely purple blossoms of the Kakapoo or the large pure white of the *Munda walli* seldom meet with a gentle hand to transplant them from the wilds of the jungle. Oh! why not, ye mothers and daughters of India, transplant some of these gems of nature to your cottage doors...⁶

Catherine Hannah Mullens' apprehension of the landscape of Bengal is never very vivid in *Phulmoni-O-Karuna*, though she pays detailed attention to human habitations and interiors of houses. Phulmoni's yard is freshly swept and a contented cow and calf stand in a shed which is covered with a creeper heavy with green gourds. Through the kitchen door one can glimpse the gleam of well-scrubbed vessels. Of the 'ten or twelve plants' in her courtyard, some are herbal, the rest are meticulously named—tulsi, gandharaj, etc.—and there is finally a touch of luxury: a China rose creeper, planted by Phulmoni's daughter, which serves as a recurring motif throughout the narrative.

These are minor details, but taken as a whole they mark a departure from the narrative tradition of Indian culture in which such specificity in the recording of a physical environment had never been thought important. Though second generation residents of India, these English women were inheritors of a different literary tradition—one in which individual perception of an object is more important than its essence, the particular more valid than the universal. The books written by Mrs Mullens and Mrs Collins may not be worth serious literary attention but they help to illustrate how realism as a literary technique is connected with a particular world-view. Some of Ian Watt's remarks from a different context may be recalled here to underline this point:

just as there is a basic congruity between the non-realist nature of the literary forms of the Greeks... and their philosophical preference

for the universal, so the modern novel is closely allied on the one hand to the realist epistemology of the modern period, and on the other to the individualism of its social structure. In the literary, the philosophical and the social spheres alike the classical focus on the ideal, the universal and the corporate has shifted completely, and the modern field of vision is mainly occupied by the discrete particular, the directly apprehended sensum, and the autonomous individual.⁷

Though simplistic in their intention and execution, the works by these English women prefigure in a rudimentary way the use of realism in the fictional handling of Indian reality. These books are not mere exempla exhorting the natives to become Christians. In fact neither of them is primarily concerned with conversion. In *The Slayer Slain* the conflict is not between Hinduism and Christianity, but between Syrianism, an early form of Christianity in Kerala, and the Protestant Church. Even those already converted to Protestantism tended to slip back to the old religion, and the apostasy of Koshy Kurien, a rich landlord, is the central concern of the novel. In *Phulmoni-O-Karuna* most of the characters are already Christians and are being made aware of 'the practical influence of Christianity on the various details of domestic life'. Two conversions are referred to during the course of the story, but they are incidental to the main plot. As indicated by the title, the plot revolves round two women and their families in a 'mofussil town in Bengal by a river'. Phulmoni, though poor in means, is rich in faith and leads an exemplary life. In contrast, Karuna is lazy and indifferent to church-going. Such contrasts are familiar in folk and fairy tale traditions: it is interesting that Nazir Ahmad's Urdu novel *Mirat-ul-Arus* (1869) and Pandit Gauri Dutt's Hindi narrative *Devrani Jethani ki Kabani* (1870), which are also stories meant chiefly to instruct women how to conduct themselves, depend on similar devices of contrast. In Nazir Ahmad's novel Akbari is lazy, querulous and selfish and her sister Asghari is intelligent and efficient. In Gauri Dutt's story of a bania family in Meerut, the elder daughter-in-law is illiterate and jealous while the educated and responsible younger daughter-in-law brings happiness to the family. Behind all these didactic tales one can detect dual archetypes of numerous folk tales

In Bengali, for example, there is the familiar story of Sukhu and Dukhu, the two sisters, who made the same journey and were given the same boons, but one ended up beautiful, happy and rich and the other ugly, poor and miserable because the latter was greedy.

Phulmoni's house is neat, her children well-scrubbed and polite. Karuna leads a disorderly life; she loves to gossip; her husband beats her regularly after coming home drunk; her children tell lies and steal. Interestingly as a character it is Karuna who becomes more alive in her crude and aggravating ways than Phulmoni the paragon of virtue. The author uses the persona of the District Magistrate's wife to narrate the story. Her acquaintance with Phulmoni and Karuna and her gradual involvement with their families is the main story line. The relationships grow; through births and deaths and festivals and disasters the narrator gets to know them intimately. Peripheral characters are introduced and the story ends happily with one marriage, one conversion and Karuna's transformation through suffering into a true Christian.

The Slayer Slain is located 'in the province of Travancore in the town of U-', where Koshy Kurien torments his Christian serfs because they refuse to work on the sabbath day. In an angry exchange he accidentally kills the little grandson of old Paulusa, a bonded labourer in his farm. Thereafter the story is about his pangs of conscience which he hides under further violence, and his young daughter's attempts to change his heart. A few subplots are introduced, and all converge in the happy ending.

The two novels have a few obvious similarities—the endings, for example. In both novels a young girl (Mariam in *The Slayer Slain* is fourteen and Sundari in the Bengali novel is fifteen) provides the Christian norm and becomes the agent of regeneration. In both we find marriages willed by the young people themselves rather than by their parents, perhaps the earliest fictional representation of such individualistic marital choice exercised in modern India. And in both novels children play an important part in disseminating education and Christian ideals.

But in spite of being written by women of such similar backgrounds and being almost contemporaneous in time, the two

novels have significant differences. The point of view in *Phulmoni-O-Karuna* is that of a benevolent white woman who can act as *deus ex machina* by offering jobs or money to the poor villagers in their moments of crisis. These men and women belong to an isolated community where to become the domestic servants of English families is the height of ambition. These people are seen as unrelated to the rest of Bengali society, although the narrator does lecture Phulmoni on the need to remain a Bengali and not to ape the ways of the British.

No Phulmoni... I do not want Bengali women to behave like English ladies. When they speak to men they do require a certain kind of modesty—which can be achieved by making the heart pure rather than by drawing a veil over the face.

She also recommends Bengali names to be given to children rather than 'English names which the natives cannot generally pronounce'.⁸ The author even provides a list of Bengali names which have no reference to 'the idolatrous objects of Hindu worship.'⁹ *Phulmoni-O-Karuna* thus also serves as a manual containing a list of names, a summary of the gospel plan of salvation, practical advice about what to do at childbirth and sickness, how to keep the sabbath and repudiate superstition.

The didactic purpose does not, however, necessarily obscure the human aspect. Karuna is loud, lazy and untidy. If she has one paisa she will spend it on tobacco rather than on soap, yet she is real as a character. She forgets all her resolutions to be gentle when her husband comes home drunk. One day when she does force herself to be tender and submissive, the drunken husband is so taken aback that he decides he must be in a brothel. He mumbles as he falls asleep: 'This one has a kind voice, I think I'll visit her more often.' These are places where the novel, transcending its didactic purpose, becomes human and even comic.

Yet Mrs Mullens' novel seems limited and narrow when compared with Mrs Collins' *The Slayer Slain* which deals with people who are connected with land, for this association gives their lives more vitality. There is something abiding and elemental in this story of guilt and retribution. The remorse of Koshy Kurien, however melodramatically presented, has an

element of real conflict. The slave Paulusa whose grandchild he has killed saved Kurien's daughter from drowning. Before disappearing under the water, Paulusa the slave says 'You killed my child, I have saved yours. We are equal now'.

The last words of the slave haunted him wherever he went. He saw them written in large characters on the waters of the deep flowing river. He saw them on the paddy banks and heard them in the humming sound of the water wheel. The winds seemed to carry the words on their wings and creep through the crevices of the door as he tossed about on his sleepless cot. And the fearful crime of a double murder hung over him like an unsheathed sword, and drove from his breast happiness and peace.

For a good part of the novel Koshy Kurien is haunted by his guilt, but when the resolution comes it is too facile to be psychologically convincing.

Are these Christian novels historical curiosities for us today, or are they part of our literary tradition? For *The Slayer Slain* a literary historian, Krishna Chaitanya, has claimed that 'it features symbolic anticipations of the directions in which the currents of relatively greater vitality in Malayalam fiction would flow later.'¹⁰ He also points out that this is perhaps the first novel in India to deal with the exploitation of landless labourers, a concern that recurs in Indian fiction of the twentieth century.

III

What has been identified as the 'Christian' novel was also generally an early work of fiction in the language concerned and is often cited as the first novel written in that language. This claim has been made on behalf of *Phulmoni-O-Karuna* by Chittaranjan Banerjee¹¹ on three grounds: it has original subject matter, i.e. it does not retell an old myth or puranic story; it creates a detailed and realistic setting; it portrays authentic characters. But in the opinion of Saroj Bandopadhyay, one of the most perceptive fiction critics in Bengali, *Phulmoni-O-Karuna* does not fulfil any *one* of the three primary conditions of a novel: namely a vision of life, a pattern of experience against a wide cultural and historical perspective, and a situation of conflict.¹² It is the second of these conditions which

is probably decisive, and the Marathi narrative *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857) meets it a shade better than *Phulmoni-O-Karuna*.

Baba Padmanji's Yamuna is an unusual young girl in that she has been to school (run by Christians), knows how to read and write, and feels stifled by the values of orthodox Hindu society. She is married to Vinayak, a young man sympathetic to her ideas, but the family to which he belongs shares the hypocritical and rigid values of the rest of the brahman community. Yamuna's honesty and innocence create problems in this set up. When the servant is hungry and asks for food Yamuna's mother-in-law wants her to tell him that there is no left-over food. But Yamuna who cannot tell a lie says: 'there is left-over food but I am not supposed to give it to you'. Yamuna is horrified when a man in the neighbourhood dies and his wife's head has to be shaved because it was supposedly her bad luck which brought death to her husband. The woman commits suicide rather than go through this ignominy and Yamuna is afraid that this will be her fate if Vinayak dies.

Thereafter the book is a string of episodes of which Yamuna and Vinayak are a part during their journey across Maharashtra, and almost every incident touches upon the predicament of a widow. In Nagpur, Pandharpur, Nasik—wherever they go—they meet some unfortunate widow leading a miserable existence. There is Venu who is treated like a servant in a joint family, Daulat's widowed cousin who is made pregnant by a sadhu in the name of religious practice, and another widow who drowned her illegitimate child in the river. Running through all this there is a discourse about the desirability of widow remarriage. An indignant brahman widow tells Yamuna that remarriage is not for brahmans though it might do for other castes. Vinayak takes part in a formal debate on the subject where pundits quote scriptures for and against the remarriage of widows.

This seeming preoccupation with widow remarriage not only leads up to Yamuna's own later predicament; it also has topical relevance in view of the heat being generated over this particular issue in Bengal as well as Maharashtra at that time.

One of its main crusaders in Bengal, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), finally got a bill passed in 1856—one year before the publication of *Yamuna Paryatan*—which made the remarriage of Hindu widows lawful in British-administered parts of the country. Enactment of the law did not, however, put an end to the controversy. We find in *Visbhavriksa* (1873) Bankim scoffing at a character who had

become a bit of a village oracle. He had read *The Citizen of the World* as well as *The Spectator*, and it was rumoured that he had got through the first three books of geometry... He used to go round telling people, 'Give up worshipping brick and rubble. Get your old aunts married again. Teach your women to read and write. Let them out of their cages.' A special reason of his liberal attitude towards women was that there were none in his own household.¹³

Even as late as the 1930s a popular novelist like Saratchandra Chatterjee did not dare show a remarried widow in any of his novels. But the problem of Hindu widows had been very much the concern of writers in India from the mid-nineteenth century. Even in a novel as rudimentary as Pandit Gauri Dutt's *Devrani Jetbani ki Kabani* (Hindi; 1870) there is reference to a nine-year-old girl whose husband died by falling off the terrace while flying kites; the good 'devrani' feels very sorry for the luckless girl:

The girls who play with her eat well and wear nice clothes. They laugh and sing. Doesn't she also want to be like them? Why should the burden of the seven rounds always weigh her down? It is the problem of our community only. Among the Muslims and among the British remarriage is possible. Now even the Bengalis are doing it. There is no bar to remarriage among the jats, gujars, barbers, kahars, aheers and dhobis...¹⁴

In *Yamuna Paryatan* an entire rambling chapter called 'Sabha' and a subsequent chapter called 'Nirnay' are devoted to the technical aspects of this issue, dwelling in detail upon what the Dharmashastras have to say. Vinayak takes the liberal standpoint in this debate.

Rather abruptly in the story Vinayak is killed in a bullock-cart accident. All the tales of the torture of widows repeated throughout the book now become real as Yamuna herself

becomes a widow. She is ill-treated by Vinayak's family but is helped by her friend from Pandharpur and the friend's son Shivaram. Shivaram becomes convinced of the superiority of Christian values and seeks conversion. Yamuna too becomes a Christian and marries again. The novel ends when Shivaram starts an organization called 'Punarvivah Uttejak Mandali' (Association for the Encouragement of Remarriage) and 'gets help from England, Scotland and America'.

As a narrative *Yamuna Paryatan* is more perfunctory than the stories by Mrs Mullens or Mrs Collins and it does not even have the vividness of realistic detail that enliven those two works. There is no attempt at characterization nor a desire to integrate the separate episodes into a larger pattern. Yamuna and Vinayak remain mere recorders of events rather than actual human beings, and their picaresque journey all across Maharashtra has no ostensible reason except as a pretext to witness the plight of women. It is obvious that Baba Padmanji's interest was not in the creation of a new genre, but in promoting social awareness. He was already the author of some fifty pamphlets on various subjects of topical interest and writing a long narrative was for him just another method of influencing public opinion. Christianity is not the central issue in *Yamuna Paryatan*. It is offered as a practical solution to Yamuna's misery only after all other possibilities are explored in scholastic debates. Similarly, Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai, author of the first Tamil novel, had earlier written non-narrative verse and used the narrative form in his prose work for propagating the same moral ideas.¹⁵

The Malayalam novel *Sukumari* (1894) by Joseph Muliyil deals with conversion to Christianity in a more central way. The characters in this novel belong to a Thiya family who embrace Christianity one by one and under different circumstances. A girl called Chirutha, whose mother is dead and whose father had joined the Christian mission, is converted to Christianity at the death-bed request of an aunt, and Chirutha's name is changed to Sukumari. She is brought up in the Basel Mission and is helped by, among others, her father, now called Sadheart. The novel is important not for its literary value but for its reformist zeal and its insistence on education as a beneficial force and Christianity as a cure for social evils. It has a historical

value in that it gives a clear picture of the activities of the Basel Mission from 1841, the year in which they established a branch at Cannanore (the place where Dr Gundut, the grandfather of Herman Hesse, once worked).

These Christian novels in different Indian languages have hardly ever been linked, perhaps because the impact of Christianity on Indian literature has generally been regarded as marginal. Compared to several other British colonies the direct influence of Christianity on Indian society has indeed been insignificant. Chinua Achebe's novels *Arrow of God* (1964) or *Things Fall Apart* (1958) are moving documents of the confrontation of two religions, two ways of life in Nigeria, as are Ngugi wa Thiongo's two early novels accounts of similar encounters in Kenya. No records like these are available in Indian literature. Although Western ideas transformed the intellectual climate in India, the Christian religious experience did not affect the mainstream culture in a big way. There has been some remarkable non-fiction prose in Marathi, specially Baba Padmanji's autobiography *Arunoday* where he talks of his conversion to Christianity in a serious and self-searching manner. Lakshmibai Tilak's *Smruti Chitra* (translated from Marathi into English as *I Follow After*) also deals with the experience of Christianity in an intense and personal way. But by and large in the imaginative literature of modern India, the spiritual and emotional aspects of Christianity do not seem to have found any expression. Bengal's major nineteenth-century poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt consciously sought and obtained conversion to Christianity, but his poetry bears no trace of any inner tension his conversion might have caused, nor has he left behind any prose recording his faith. Of the two missionary women discussed earlier, Mrs Mullens regarded Christianity merely as a practical guide to conduct while Mrs Collins, although she did touch upon the theme of guilt and regeneration, did not go deep into it. Baba Padmanji in *Yamuna Paryatan* dealt with Christianity only because it offered an escape from the tyranny of an oppressive society. This aspect of Christianity has continued to be relevant in Indian life and literature. In one of the novels of Saratchandra in the next century (*Srikanta*, Part III, 1927) there is passing reference to a

family that has been degraded because of a lapse on the part of an ancestor. Harassed and oppressed by society, a woman in that family says: 'I have an uncle who has become a Christian after getting a job in Dumka. He has escaped this torture.' But such drastic solutions are never considered seriously in Saratchandra's novels. In the well-known Kannada novel by B. Shivaram Karanth, *Chommana Doodi* (1945), conversion to Christianity is offered as an attractive alternative to social oppression, but the central character Choma prefers to retain his lower caste Hindu identity although his children succumb to the temptation.

Of the two kinds of people who were converted to Christianity in nineteenth-century India, intellectuals like Michael Madhusudan Dutt or Baba Padmanji were in a minority. The majority were from the socially and economically depressed classes who found in Christianity a better way of life. The situation regarding conversion is expressed by an old grandmother in *The Slayer Slain*—'whoever has heard of a Brahmin getting converted to Christianity?'—and Krishna Chaitanya has pointed out an interesting paradox in this professedly Christian novel: 'While it attacks caste, the social ambience has insidiously influenced the author with the prestige of caste; that is why the Brahmin comes on the scene to donate a pedigree to the (Christian) heroine by claiming a blood relationship.'¹⁶

The task of the Christian missionary in India was an uphill one in the early years of the nineteenth century. The Abbe Dubois, after many years of missionary work in South India, admitted in 1815 that he had 'watered the soil with his tears... They had "fallen on naked rock"... In the last thirty years there had been only 300 converts of whom 200 were Pariahs'.¹⁷ Seen as a whole, in the nineteenth century the spread of Christianity in India was not a central event socially or culturally. The literary by-products of missionary activities also turn out to be minor works, contributing only indirectly to the evolution of the novel in India, but the tributaries are important in understanding the mainstream. The historical value of these works cannot be entirely ignored because they introduced a non-traditional element in the narrative and brought in the first

traces of realism, even though their primary aim was didactic. In a recent essay, the contemporary Marathi novelist Bhalchandra Nemade has divided the entire corpus of Marathi fiction into three basic strands that have evolved, diverged, combined and parted to form many patterns.¹⁸ One of them he calls the *Yamuna Paryatan* strand, which incorporates social reform impulses in a functional manner in literature. The other two are the *Muktamala* (1861) and the *Mochangad* (1872) strands, wherein these two early novels embody the imaginative-romantic urge and the revivalist-historical spirit respectively. Similar trifurcations can probably be made in the fiction corpus of other Indian languages. What we may note here is that the first of these, manifested in utilitarian or didactic aims in some of India's early fiction, was not confined to Christian writers. The early novels of Nazir Ahmad (1836–1912), for example, were written mainly to instruct. Ahmad's first work, *Mirat-ul-Arus* (*The Bride's Mirror*; Urdu, 1869), was written to show young girls the qualities that would stand them in good stead when they set up house. One year later Pandit Gauri Dutt's Hindi narrative *Devrani Jethani ki Kabani*, sometimes claimed as the first novel in Hindi, had an identical theme, although the differences in social and cultural milieu and in language—one is about a Hindu bania family in Meerut and the other about a Muslim family in Delhi; one is written in the dialect of Khari boli which was actually spoken in western UP at that time, rendered without any punctuation or paragraphing, and the other in a flexible near-colloquial Urdu, graceful yet functional, the language of the Muslims in Delhi—make the total effects somewhat dissimilar. But both stories describe two brides: one lazy and worthless and the other educated and exemplary—and the second girl in each case sets up an informal school for the dissemination of education among women. Since most of these instructive books were published, if not written, with official patronage (*Mirat-ul-Arus*, for example, was originally written for private circulation), they were often prescribed as textbooks. Nazir Ahmad's *Taubut-un-Nasub* (1877), which was translated by M. Kempson into English (*The Repentance of Nussoob*, 1884), carried a foreword which ends thus:

for all these reasons I have great satisfaction in commending Mr Kempson's translation to all who are interested in India, and also in advocating... the use of the original treatise as a text book for the acquisition of Hindusthani and for the examination of proficiency in the same.

W. M., July 1884.

This Kempson was obviously the Director of Public Instruction at the time because Gauri Dutt, the author of *Devrani Jethani ki Kabani*, joyfully informs the reader in his preface how Mr Kempson, finding the book very enjoyable 'had ordered it to be published with corrections and bought two hundred copies of it'. *Mirat-ul-Arus* was written by Ahmad for his daughters and the women of the *mobulla* also 'came to listen when it was being read'. When his eldest daughter got married Ahmad 'included the manuscript in her dower as a jewel of great price and it achieved no less a reputation in her new home'.¹⁹ The book was published only after its chance discovery by Kempson, in whose department Ahmad was then employed.

Both the works of Gauri Dutt and Nazir Ahmad emphasize the need for education among women to make family life happy: 'When the man is literate and the woman is not, there can be no meeting of minds,' wrote Dutt, and thus Anandi, the younger brother's wife, is shown to bring cheer and prosperity into the family. In Ahmad's story Asghari, the younger sister, has a similar effect on a family which was nearly destroyed by her foolish and ignorant older sister Akbari. Asghari is very articulate about dignity of labour (p. 150), argues against pomp at weddings (pp. 165-7) and has intelligent views about British rule in India and employment opportunities (p. 138). She has the courage and initiative to travel alone from Delhi to Sialkot in order to bring an errant husband back to the right path. In the informal school she ran in her house, girls were taught to read, keep accounts, do calligraphy, stitch, dye clothes, embroider (twelve different kinds of fancy needlework are mentioned), cook (she mentions eleven varieties of pulao); child care and home remedies of common ailments are also listed, and recipes and remedies are woven into the texture of the story so that the reader can learn while being entertained. Similar devices are used in *Devrani Jethani ki Kabani*, and in both stories

several letters are reproduced, perhaps with the intention of making women readers learn how to write letters properly. Special mention must be made of the letters these girls received from their fathers in both novels, advising them how to conduct themselves in their new homes. These letters distil the social values of the milieu with emphasis on a woman's tolerance, self-effacement, co-operation and consideration for others. We have here entertainment, combined with practical education as in Mrs Mullens' novel, and the same pattern continues in all the didactic literature of the period. At least one Englishman saw the influence of Christianity behind this kind of writing. In the foreword to Ahmad's *Taubut-un-Nasub*, which was written to counter indifference to Islamic religion, he self-righteously claimed that even though the book propagated the practice of Islam it was actually written under Christian influence: 'In fact it is only in country [*sic*] under Christian influences, like those which happily are seen and felt in India, that the idea of such a book should present itself to the Moslem mind.'²⁰

Although the aim of *Taubut-un-Nasub* is to emphasize the need for religious practice, the book is more than a mere didactic tract. The novel begins with an evocative description of a cholera epidemic (incidentally, epidemics were very much a part of ordinary reality; the first page of Gauri Dutt's story casually mentions 'the last cholera season' when both parents of Sarvasukh died) which nearly killed Nasuh. Nasuh had a vision in which his dead father told him how he repented after having led an irreligious life. Nasuh becomes a devout Muslim when he recovers, and the rest of the narrative describes his attempts to convince his wife and children of the need to be good Muslims. He meets resistance from only two of his five children, specially from his eldest son who is a poet, a kite-flier, a pigeon-keeper and a reader of secular books like *Gul Bakavali*, *Fisana Ajaib* and *Chabar Darvisb*—a rather vivid portrait of a dilettante. A long extract from the first chapter will illustrate how the narrative operates on two levels, the evocative and the pragmatic:

Not very long ago the cholera was so bad in Delhi that thirty or forty deaths a day were counted in a single street. The public thoroughfares.

once crowded with men till midnight, were empty. The hammer of the artizan had ceased, and the street criers were dumb. There was no visiting, no hospitality, no friendly intercourse, for all had lost heart and hope. A man might be walking about in the best of health, when all of a sudden he felt ill. There was no chance of escape, no time even to make a will. In one short quarter of an hour all was over—vomiting, medicine, prayer and the death rattle. The city lost half its population.

Nusooch, whose story I am about to tell, had foreseen at the first outbreak the necessity for precaution. He had his cooking vessels re-tinned, and impressed the duty of cleanliness on his household. Frankincense was burned, and camphor and charcoal placed about the rooms. The usual native remedies—coconut, aniseed, tamarind, lime juice, etc.—were provided in readiness for an emergency. A stock of English medicines was laid in—cholera-pills from the dispensary, tincture from Allahabad, chlorodyne from Agra, and a specific, said to have been recently discovered by a Bengali, was procured from Benares...²¹

The first paragraph is a brief but effective evocation of pestilence, bringing to mind Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*. The second has a manual-like quality, enumerating specific remedies and actual places in a pragmatic matter-of-fact manner. The two qualities—the once-upon-a-time aura and the here-and-now flavour—alternate in the entire text of *Taubut-un-Nusub*.

Devrani Jetbani ki Kabani has very little evocation, the intention of the writer being merely 'to show the customs of the banias at the time of birth, death and marriages; what are the differences between educated and illiterate women; how to bring up children... etc.' (Author's Preface to the first edition). The other contender for the honour of being the first Hindi novel, *Pariksha guru* (1882) by Srinivas Das also has a didactic purpose: largely the protection of Hindu values against the influence of the West. Nazir Ahmad was an almost exact contemporary of Bankim, the first major Indian novelist. In Bankim one finds very little of the single track utilitarian purpose that characterizes much of the early Hindi/Urdu fiction. If in Bankim's later novels (for example, *Anandamath* or *Debi Chaudhurani*—discussed in the next chapter) Hindu values or the Shakti cult are valorised, this is not done at the cost of characterization or believable human situations.

Using fiction primarily as propaganda—be it for Christian, Muslim or Hindu values—has its own built-in problems. These

efforts, however effective they might have been in their immediate non-literary purpose, could not contribute to the evolution of the novel in any central way because a subtle and certain link exists between the novel as a genre and liberal ideology as a way of life. This is because the novel recognizes the uniqueness of individuals and accepts a plurality of beliefs and values. In other words the novel comes into being only when the reader and the writer believe in the uniqueness of the individual and his will. Individuals and their relationships are important only when they are not completely controlled by and are not totally subservient to powers like the church or the Dharmashastra or the gods on Olympus.

'The first great novel of world literature stands at the beginning of the time when the Christian God began to forsake the world', said Lukacs in a slightly different context,²² but one can see that individual doubt and the loneliness of man are conditions more conducive to the writing of the novel than absolute faith or total dependence on collective values. This may be one reason why even in our own time very few 'committed' writers have been able to create memorable works of fiction. A character who has not made the final choice yet, either in terms of spiritual faith or of political creed, can provide the writer with richer fictional material than one who has already identified himself with a set of beliefs. In a recent interview²³ Satyajit Ray corroborated this view in terms of the cinema while explaining why in his film *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*) the Naxalite brother is less important to him as a psychological entity than the vacillating older brother torn by doubts. In real life firm commitment may lead to prompt and decisive action, but rendered in art this tends to reduce human figures to puppets. The novel as a genre needs especially to examine human beings in situations where individuals exercise a choice. The purely missionary or propaganda novel which does not allow such choice is a contradiction in terms. The early Indian novels of the variety discussed here engage our attention largely for historical reasons, as examples of the earliest attempts to graft a new form on existing fictional traditions. Each such attempt was also an exercise in narrative prose which extended the possibilities of generic development.