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Politics of Misrepresenting the Oppressed: A Critique of Abdus Samad's Urdu Novel *Dhamak*[*]

Abdus Samad (ʿAbdu'ṣ-Ṣamad) is known less as a teacher of political science and more as a famous Urdu fiction writer. Starting his literary career with short story writing, he later began writing novels. All five of his novels are accounts of the politics of twentieth-century Bihar. The first, *Dō Gaz Zamīn* (Two Yards of Land, 1988), deals with the politics of the partitions of the Indian subcontinent (first of India in 1947 and then the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971) and depicts its impact on a declining Muslim feudal family of Bihar Shareef, roughly from the 1920s to the 1970s (Ghosh 1998, 1–40; Qasmi 2008, 24–26). It earned great praise from Urdu literary critics and in 1990 received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. His second novel *Mahātmā* (The Great Soul, 1992), the least appreciated of his novels critically, is a pessimistic account of the deep decline in the quality of higher education. His third novel, *Khvābōñ kā Savērā* (Dawn of Dreams, 1994), is the most critically acclaimed in terms of theme, technique, style, treatment, and so on. It deals with Muslims and their engagement with (or place in) the secular democracy of India in an increasingly communalized polity and society. In a quote appearing on the cover of his fourth novel *Mahāsāgar* (The Ocean, 1999), he is very explicit about why he gives primacy to the subject of politics in his writing.

> […] in today's life political factors have a deep impact since politics is no

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> longer confined to the palaces and houses of the legislature. The very air that people breathe is affected by politics. People talk about politics continually; they love it and they hate it too. Today we are engrossed in politics to such an extent that we cannot escape it even if we want to […].
>
> (back cover)[1]

Mahāsāgar is a fictional depiction of the communally charged decade of the 1980s (when the Ayodhya dispute spawned serious communal polarization in the civil society throughout most parts of India). In his fifth novel, *Dẖamak* (Rumblings, 2004), Abdus Samad depicts the subtle details pertaining to the way in which corrupt and opportunistic power politics is maneuvered. This has been portrayed through the depiction of a Dalit politician associated initially with the ideologically emancipatory politics of the Naxalite groups; the tactical/ideological conflicts within the Naxalite groups push him into the dirty world of corrupt, opportunistic power politics.

It is said that in Abdus Samad's novels "there is a specific style of subtle protest against the oppressive and corrupt system, which raises some questions in readers' minds, leaving them at liberty to be ashamed, irritated, or silenced/shocked or to rise in protest against the ills depicted in the novel" (Arshad 2005, 462). In this essay I argue that the "political realities" depicted in Abdus Samad's novels suffer from misrepresentation (or from inadequate treatment of the stories, which in itself results in misrepresentation) of the weaker/marginalized sections of society—in this case the militancy of the Dalits through Naxalism.[2] It also examines whether this misrepresentation is politically/subjectively determined.

Through his novels Abdus Samad has resorted to the construction of ideologies in the cultural sphere (Sethi 1999, 1). It could therefore be suggested that the misrepresentation of "actual" events stems from prejudicial political motives. As ʿAtīqu'l-Lāh puts it with reference to *Dẖamak*: "[H]is novel is a historicized text, which has articulated the socio-political realities with 'ideological' prejudices" (2005, 64). This "politics of misrepresenting" the Dalits is being pursued in the sphere of creative literature at a time when, as Beth has it,

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[1]All titles and passages from *Dẖamak*, *Mahāsāgar*, and the other Urdu and Hindi works cited here have been translated by me unless otherwise noted.

[2]Naxalism refers to the extremist, revolutionary political activism inspired by Marxism, Maoism, Leninism, etc., which tried to violently force the state to implement land reforms. It originated in a village called Naxalbari in Darjeeling, West Bengal in the late 1960s and various splinter groups now operate in major parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, etc.

> Dalits have adeptly negotiated a space within [the literary public sphere] by reinterpreting the authority gained from personal experience and self-perception. In fact, as the "right" or "ability" of the marginalized group to write literature is challenged by dominant groups, Dalit writers fight back for the right to speak as well as to redefine the boundaries of what can be said.
>
> (2007, 567)

Abdus Samad's "politics of misrepresentation" becomes quite obvious when one juxtaposes the fictive realities of *Dẖamak* with the actual realities reported in newspapers, magazines and academic journals published during August–September 1988. The novel begins with the story of a gang rape of Dalit girls in rural Bihar, and the central character Rājā Rām (alias Rājū), who has connections with an extremist underground organization, registers his protest by blackening the face of the minister who visits the affected village Bhagwanpur, Jehanabad (Bihar).[3]

This fictionalized narrative has close similarities to a real event in the village of Damuha in Jehanabad. In August 1988 the then Congress Chief Minister of Bihar, Bhagwat Jha Azad, visited the village after a massacre of Dalits. His face was reportedly blackened by Virendra Kumar Vidrohi of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS)—one of the groups associated with the revolutionary left (Naxalites) in Bihar—saying, "Mr. Chief Minister, now that you have come to Damuha [to offer condolences], you may return [to Patna and the world beyond the village] with your face blackened in shame" (Hauser 1993, 91). Vidrohi (literally, the rebel) was immediately put behind bars, from where he "symbolically" contested state Assembly elections in February 1990 on the ticket of the Indian People's Front (IPF) party (*ibid.*). Vidrohi was murdered in Kurtha (Jehanabad) on 30 January 1993, allegedly by rival Naxalite gangs.

This episode in Bihar had strong symbolic and direct meaning and drew widespread attention from the media and the public in general. There is a strong possibility that Abdus Samad took up this incident to begin *Dẖamak*.[4] However, the novelist preferred to present the story with a melodramatic slant, wherein Rājū is not killed, but rather is pushed into the vortex of the highly degenerated milieu of power politics. Such a portrayal might be construed as a strong prejudice against the rural Dalit

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[3]Bhagwanpur also happens to be a real village in Jehanabad (Bihar) and was one of the sites of ferocious anti-Dalit violence in the 1980s (Urmilesh 1999, 179).

[4]Perhaps unaware of the 1988 events in Damuha, Fāṭmī, an Urdu critic, comments that the *Dẖamak* episode of a Dalit blackening the face of a minister is something dramatic, mechanical and unbelievable (2005, 474).

poor on the part of the author because the narrative does not, though it could, create a character or storyline depicting the overt reality of such movements and individuals striving sincerely, notwithstanding the means, for the empowerment of the marginalized rural poor. (Such prejudices against these movements have indeed been displayed by a section of the mainstream media (Urmilesh 1999, 193–99)).

Available evidence, for instance, suggests that the few individuals who successfully contested polls as candidates of militant political parties displayed none of the misconduct generally in evidence in the case of legislators belonging to "mainstream" political parties. As an illustration, we can take the case of the continued engagement of Rameshwar Prasad, who was elected to the lower house (Lok Sabha) of the Parliament in 1989 from Arrah constituency. Rameshwar, the real life Naxalite, was a far cry from Rājū, the central character of *Dẖamak*. It could be added here that Rameshwar Prasad's electoral victory was particularly significant since he belonged to a family of landless agricultural laborers, his father was a brick kiln worker, belonging to a lowly Noniah caste, yet Rameshwar was able to rise to the position of General Secretary of the IPF party. In the state Assembly elections of 1990, as many as seven individuals associated with such parties were elected to the Bihar Assembly, yet both the elected and non-elected members of these parties, far from degenerating into corrupt politicians, constantly engage in fighting for the rural poor themselves—on the streets, in the media and on academic campuses, as well as inside the legislature.

This point has been stressed with greater clarity by Walter Hauser, who says,

> in any consideration of India's social and political experience, we must go beyond the apocalyptic images of backwardness, hopelessness and revulsion […]. There is another reality […] of struggle for justice, social equity, and change […]. [I]n Bihar, the IPF has given voice to that struggle […]
>
> (1993, 116)

Arun Kumar arrives at the same conclusion:

> Despite its apparent failure, the Naxalite movement achieved what none of the kisan movements had managed before. It brought the self of the lowly and the labouring to the very centre of the political pursuits. It was an irony of a historic proportion that those who sought to celebrate human dignity were forced to pick up arms […] whatever be the justification for their [Naxalites'] violent method, the state quickly moved in to reclaim its monopoly over violence and crushed the movement.
>
> (2001, 91)

It has ultimately made the dissent of the rural poor more audible and understandable to us all (Nandy 1989, 270–71).

In sharp contrast to the fictional depiction, a large volume of academic research in the social sciences, journalistic investigations and ideologically aligned "little" magazines, as well as reports of official, judicial inquiries, have publicized the comprehensive details of the quest of Dalits for social dignity, economic equality and political power. Thus, the findings of Bela Bhatia's field visits, undertaken during 1995–1996, demonstrated that such struggles brought a sense of dignity, one of the principal achievements of the Naxalite movement. Other achievements include an end to forced labor, improved wages and enhanced self-respect (2005, 1536–49).

Abdus Samad displays a serious lack of understanding and insight into the subject as well as inadequate creative imagination. Had he added a subplot depicting the brighter side of emancipatory politics, the novel would certainly have become more objective in its treatment. By omitting this aspect of the political reality, *Dẖamak* eliminates the "audibility of dissent" and eventually ends up becoming a less convincing novel.

In the story there are seven rape victims between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. Only one of them, Sundrī, is literate, and she is portrayed as having a relatively greater degree of awareness and self-esteem. She refuses to cooperate with the state machinery in bringing the culprits to justice and maintains a conspicuous silence. The narrative implicitly conveys the politically determined insincerity of the state apparatus in the whole exercise. Another character, Shīla, originally from this village, is the only daughter of a respected, humble school teacher. Having migrated to the city for education, she now resides in a hostel of questionable reputation. She earns some degree of disrepute, along with a measure of power, influence and wealth, because she also associates herself with the women's wing of a political party. Shīla symbolizes the agency through which the politically produced "strange mix of good and evils of the city" (2004, 86–94)[5] reach the fictive village Bhagwanpur. (The patriarchal consternation accorded her by the villagers is also indicative of male chauvinism, but that is not at all a subject of *Dẖamak*.) Reading about the incident in the newspapers she goes there to visit Sundrī. Trying to persuade Sundrī to speak out, she says,

> "You haven't lost anything, Sundri. If anything has been lost, it is something belonging to the male dominated society which has determined its values strictly in accordance with its own self-interest. Who says

[5]All quotes from *Dẖamak* are taken from the 2004 edition.

> women's honor is robbed? In reality, the honor of the woman isn't robbed but rather that of the men and their mothers, sisters and daughters. Men should hide their faces in shame; why should women spoil their lives? […] Look at me, did I harm anyone? My father sent me to the city to obtain higher education, and I could obtain many comforts for myself: good clothes, good food, elevated thinking.… Many kinds of damaging rumors were circulated. Today, few oppressors have victimized you. But in the people's imagination I have been made to suffer such stigma several times."
>
> (90–92)

Similarly, she tries to convince Sundrī to become involved in politics in order "to take revenge against the men," even though she "knows only too well that for women, politics and prostitution are not much different" (93). But Sundrī is abruptly shown to have emerged as the leader of an extremist group—succeeding an ideologically informed visionary, an honest man who was an England-educated doctor belonging to a landed family, a kind of counter-élite. The man has been killed in a fake police encounter. After Sundrī joins an extremist/Naxalite group, the novel should have had Sundrī progress toward involving herself in the emancipatory feminist struggle in which most such groups are engaged. Far from it, the author prefers to depict Sundrī as someone obsessed with mindless revenge, like the infamous "bandit queen" of India, Phoolan Devi (164–86). By doing so, *Dẖamak* blurs the distinction between Naxalism and gangsterism and banditry. Is it because of the prejudice or ignorance of the author regarding two completely different phenomena? Such naiveté and self-contradiction on his part is also reflected elsewhere. While on the one hand the novel explicitly refers to the extremist/Naxalite movements (197, 103, 180), on the other hand it shows the character of the doctor, an underground leader-activist engaged in violent revolution, addressing Rājū as follows:

> "Now you must also know the external enemies. Ours is a people's struggle. We want the laws enacted during the last fifty years for the benefit of the poor, landless workers to be implemented. Everyone should get their due. We are neither Naxalite nor extremist. Nevertheless, we won't spare anyone who puts an obstacle in our path. The danger is that many opportunists will also sneak into our movement to indulge in theft, robbery, and killings for their own benefit and thereby inflict disrepute on our movement…."
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> (119–20)

The story of *Dẖamak* has some resemblance to Qurratulain Hyder's novel *Ākhir-e Shab kē Hamsafar* (literally, Late Night Fellow Travelers,

1979). For example, similarities can be seen between Rājū in *Dẖamak* and Raiḥān in *Ākhir-e Shab kē Hamsafar*. In reviewing Hyder's novel, Thomas Palakeel asserts that Raiḥān "symbolizes the eventual ruin and decay of the leftist ideology" (1995, 244). He is a person who compromises with the idealism of his youth and "allows [himself] to be seduced by the corruptions […] (*ibid.*, 245) Unlike Rājū, however, Raiḥān is also seen as "straining to carry the burden of so much personal and political alienation" *(ibid.*, 244). Hyder's novel, in line with its commitment to portraying all facets of reality, crafts another character, Dīpālī, "who takes center stage in the novel as its idealist heroine" and continues to follow the leftist path as a staunch idealist despite being "riddled with guilt, displacement and the punishment of loss," after disillusionment (*ibid.*). Moreover, in order to keep alive or acknowledge all political postures, Hyder's novel ends with a defining, profound and optimistic sentence, "For millions of years the sun has been rising and going down and rising again and going down again and rising" (1979, 348). Compare this with Abdus Samad, who is credited with a "transparent and frank narrative" (Ḥusainu'l-Ḥaq 2005, 425), yet fails to narrate the story in a way that conveys to his readers the strain of the personal versus the political in his character Rājū. This hardly succeeds in generating any sympathy for Rājū, even though he is shown to be feeling a subtle remorse or guilt towards the end of the story. The novel ends with Rājū's "commitment" that he will certainly visit his native village, which remains deprived not only of basic amenities but also of security. The novel says, "he will come here again […] will certainly come…" (423). But the author fails to elaborate on what means, what programs Rājū will adopt to pull his village out of its morass of politically perpetuated backwardness and brutality.

Secondly, *Dẖamak* leaves much to be desired when it comes to providing the picturesque details of the cultural life of the poor Dalits living in the rural landscape of this part of Bihar, which is less than a hundred kilometers from Patna, where the novelist himself lives. Only half a sentence is used to describe the whole picture of the village. The houses of the rural Dalit poor are described as "*miṭṭī kā farsh, miṭṭī kī čẖat, dīvārēñ miṭṭī kī, darvāza bẖī miṭṭī kā*" (earthen floor, earthen roof, earthen walls, earthen door too) (49). Likewise in chapter 21 (140–41), in the form of a letter being written by a conscientious police officer to his friend who is also a police officer, Abdus Samad attempts to describe the village, the roots of caste-based oppression, and the violence and counter-violence taking place, but he does not devote more than a few quick sentences to the effort. Beyond this the novel hardly draws any picture of the deprived, oppressed, brutalized everyday living of the people of such villages.

It has been rightly pointed out that since the intelligentsia remain aloof from the subaltern classes, and there is a disjunction between the field of writing and the field of political action, it glosses over dissent and propagates popular bourgeoisie ideology. Could Abdus Samad be indicted on this same score? Might this be the reason Abdus Samad avoids depicting the historical milieu and the events which led to the emergence of Naxalism in parts of Bihar? To answer this question we need to examine the historical accounts of the socio-political life of the Dalits in the Naxalite-affected areas of Bihar.

Some historical accounts have been produced by social scientists who were in the region as participant-observers or as investigative journalists (Sinha 1982, 148–52; Sajjad 2000). One such scholar/journalist was Arvind Narayan Das who wrote:

> In response to the near-total breakdown not only of the established polity but also of established norms of law and order, reflected in Bihar in the phenomena of booth-capture, mafia marauding, and macabre "Harijan hunting"—all springing from the tension between an antiquated agrarian base and a lumpenized cultural and political superstructure—the subaltern people in the region have always struggled to create space for themselves to survive in dignity, if not in peace.
>
> (1992, 106)

Such political assertiveness is exemplified by the creation of a "new democratic consciousness." Recounting and assessing the manifold accomplishments of such extremist groups (the New Left), Das informs us that their politics has ensured

> economic gains for the rural poor through enforcing payment of minimum wages, prescribed by law but seldom actually paid by landowners, and even distribution of some ceiling-surplus lands in accordance with long-enacted but hardly ever implemented legislation [...].
>
> (*ibid.*, 109)

They have upgraded irrigation works, wells, pastures, etc. through community participation, and have thereby come to represent the "very process of State formation in an otherwise anarchic situation" (*ibid.*, 110). He goes on, "A refreshing aspect of the 'new Naxalite' movement has been that, unlike vulgar Marxists, it has neither ignored the caste question nor has it gone overboard on the non-class understanding of caste, culture and ethnicity" (*ibid.*). They have also addressed other issues like the "position of women and cultural heterogeneity" (*ibid.*). They have forced the Block Development Officers (BDO) to distribute the funds of the old age pension scheme (the Indira Awas Yojana scheme), intended

to provide money for shelter for the rural poor, and to implement other welfare schemes of the state for the targeted beneficiaries, rather than letting the BDO siphon the funds for personal benefit. The demands of the Naxalite groups forced both "the local state in Bihar and the central government of India [to make] available substantial amounts of public funding" (Kunnath 2006, 114). They launched a campaign against liquor and domestic violence against women (*ibid.*, 107). By contesting elections in 1985 and forming Matdata Suraksha Samiti (Voters' Protection Committees), the IPF, facilitated the actualization of democracy at the grassroots. After achieving some degree of success in organizing the poor Dalits, the Naxalites changed the feudal hegemony in various ways. Arun Sinha, a journalist who covered the atrocities committed against Harijans extensively in the 1970s, says that "before 1975, virtually no progress had been made towards land reforms in Bihar." Various laws enacted during the colonial and postcolonial periods to set wages for agricultural laborers, to acquire surplus land from landlords and redistribute it among the rural poor, to prohibit bonded labor, to restrict rural indebtedness, and improve the status of women all remained unimplemented until the Naxalite violence started hitting the landlords from the late 1960s onwards (1982, 148–52). The Naxalites also came to be recognized as important village leaders in settling rural disputes. George Kunnath's Naxalite contact Rājū reports,

> A woman of [landed] Kurmi caste, whose husband was killed by the Sanghathan [Naxalite organization] during the initial days of struggle, was refused her share of land by her husband's brother. She approached the Sanghathan. As the head of the village committee, I took up the issue on her behalf. I met her husband's brother, and with the authority of the Sanghathan behind me, I persuaded him to hand over her husband's share of land to her. She then sold that piece of land, and now is happily settled elsewhere.
>
> (2006, 107)

Thus, Das observes, "the first task of deepening and extending social democracy in Bihar comprises not of aiming for electoral victory but merely to provide for participation of the people in the actualization of universal adult suffrage" (1992, 108). Their emergence has also put pressure on the "tired old CPI" [Communist Party of India] to again "start intervening in the anti-feudal and broadly democratic movement" (*ibid.*, 111). The rise of popular and honest leaders such as A. K. Roy against the mafia murders in the coalfields (now in Jharkhand, which was created out of Bihar in late 2000), and the "involvement of the 'New Left' with the re-emergent Jharkhand movement in terms of highlighting the genuine

grievances of the tribals is also not insignificant" (*ibid.*). Nor is the "role of organizations like the Jan Sanskriti Manch [and the Inqilābī Muslim Conference, Teḥrīk-e Nisvāñ, I may add] in the struggle against religious fundamentalism, obscurantist ideology, rank casteism and feudal oppression of women" (*ibid.*). Through songs, posters, pamphlets, etc., they have given rise to "an incipient cultural renaissance" which is moving towards "shaping a new Bihar" (*ibid.*, 112; Sajjad 2008, 37–40). Not surprisingly, students and other *mofussil* intelligentsia were attracted to such enterprises. This gave rise to the All Bihar Students' Union (ABSU) and the All India Students' Association (AISA), which played a significant role in transforming (more particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s) the academic and political outlook not only of the crumbling and starved university campuses of Bihar, but also of premier institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Allahabad University (once the "Oxford of the East"). The charismatic young leader, and former President of the JNU Students' Union, Chandrashekhar, rather than settling into a "cozy life" in academics or in "lucrative" establishmentarian politics, preferred to involve himself in the anti-feudal, anti-gangster politics of North Bihar and lost his life at Siwan in March 1997. This resulted in large-scale protest demonstrations from Delhi to Bihar, widely reported in the media. The issues debated in the publications of these extremist groups, such as the English monthly *Liberation* and the Hindi monthly *Lok Yudh*, and the interventions of the extremists' leaders, not only in the mainstream media and academic journals but also amongst their huge following, are testimony to their deep concern for socio-economic development, social justice, and politico-economic empowerment of the deprived and oppressed segments of society. These interventions also articulate their visionary politics, exposing the "facile development dreams of [and reduction or perpetuation of Bihar as India's 'internal colony' by] mainstream power politics and then offering 'new economics and politics' for Bihar which is determined to rise with all its might and majesty" (Bhattacharya 2000, 3800–3804).

It appears that Abdus Samad, as a novelist, has a strong predilection towards pessimism, tending towards portraying only the darker aspects (or the misrepresentation) of realities. This predisposition of the author is also evident in some of his other novels. For instance, in his *Mahātmā* he has depicted the serious degeneration of higher education in Bihar, which is of course a bitter reality, but there are other redeeming realities as well. In fact, the Naxalite movement in Bihar was initiated by a teacher, "Master" Jagdish Mahto, who was a Dalit and who (again unlike Rājū in *Dẖamak*) was murdered as a result of his continued struggle against

oppression. In discussing the terribly exploitative socio-economic and political context, Das points to the emergence of Naxalism and the participation of students in these groups. He informs us,

> In this situation entered some "outside" elements, known both to the people and police as "Naxalites." Among the top "Naxalite" leaders was Satyanarain Singh [...] and Kesho Prasad Singh [...] joined by grass-roots workers like Jagdish Mahto, [...] [who had been] forced into "Naxalism" by the landowners themselves.
>
> (1983, 248)

This group launched a vigorous campaign in the February 1967 Assembly elections against the "corrupt Congress rule led by K. B. Sahay" (*ibid.*). It found a response from university students on an unprecedented scale. During this election, Jagdish Mahto campaigned for Ram Naresh Ram of CPI (now in CPI-ML [Marxist Leninist] Liberation), which had stirred up Ekwari, the home village of Jagdish Mahto, and succeeded in preventing the village booth from being rigged by the biggest landlord of the village, Nathuni Singh (*ibid.*, 249; Sinha 1972, n.p.). It should be recalled that until 1995 the Election Commission of India had not been able to let the significant number of landless poor Dalits in Bihar exercise their right to vote. This right was ensured to them (less so during the 1970s and more during the 1980s) only in those regions where they were organized under one or the other extremist-left groups (Mukherjee and Yadav 1982, 119–47). Amrik Nimbran, an officer of the Indian Police Service (IPS), suggests in his 1992 account that the armed insurrection of the Dalit peasantry only starts up when the proportion of landless laborers rises to thirty-five percent or above, other means of employment are choked, and this is combined with social abuse (e.g., assaults on the honor of women), humiliation and other types of exploitation.

Abdus Samad keeps himself blissfully ignorant about all these realities of alternative politics, consistently engaged in bringing about genuine socio-economic change, and *Dẖamak*, therefore, fails to creatively fictionalize them (in its first 200 odd pages), whereas it successfully narrates the precise details of all kinds of maneuverings of mainstream power politics. To enrich such narratives—both qualitatively and quantitatively—he creates characters such as Mahēsh and Rājak who are the personal secretaries of corrupt ministers. Despite being marginal characters, the two of them turn out to be prime movers of the plotline involving political wheeling and dealing The conversations of these characters testify to the fact that the author is deeply aware of the way such maneuvering goes on. It also demonstrates the author's insightful awareness of the

unscrupulous crippling and subjugation of the bureaucracy by such corrupt politics. An equally deep study of, or imaginative observation of, the alternative politics of socio-economic change is lacking.

The latter are missed by the author either because of a personal bias or because of an inadequate and superficial grasp of the issues he chooses to write about, or perhaps both. Similarly in his novel *Mahātmā*, where Abdus Samad takes up the important issue of the deep crisis in academia, the treatment of the subject is one dimensional, focusing on a single aspect of a complex reality and ignoring other significant elements. Here such treatment is also detrimental because there are very few insiders' accounts about academic degeneration in India. True, educational institutions in Indian provinces such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa have suffered (and are suffering) the kind of degeneration that has been depicted in *Mahātmā*, but at the same time, we also have the historically documented reality that the Patna University Teachers' Association, rather than confining its agitations to only demanding better salaries and benefits, organized seminars and discussions on ways to reform universities, subjecting the decision-making bodies of the universities to the sharpest criticism and showing a deep concern for the declining standards of the academic centers in the 1970s.

In the third volume of his Urdu autobiography *Apnā Talāsh Mēñ* (In Search of Myself), Kalīmu'd-Dīn Aḥmad, a noted Urdu critic and a distinguished professor of English literature at Patna University, also provides detailed accounts of high quality academics in the university. These are corroborated further in the Urdu autobiography of Muḥammad Moḥsin, a professor of Psychology at the same university. It is further corroborated by Iqbāl Ḥusain, a principal of the prestigious Patna College, in his Urdu autobiography. These are things an author should not ignore. And they should not simply be dismissed by saying that *Mahātmā* is not concerned with the past. For in order to comprehend the problems of the uneasiness in the present context of the educational affairs, one has to look into its past (Jha 1985, 13). As observed by Goldman,

> [E]very social fact is a historical fact and vice-versa and therefore knowledge of human reality depends on how well the present is comprehended along with the past [and] when men and social groups study history [...] they are looking primarily for values...."
>
> (qtd. in Jha 1985, 13)

This point has been further clarified by Rudolph and Rudolph (1972):

> historical traditions and experience create values ... that survive even when the original conditions that give rise to them fade into the past. The

> origins of educational institutions impress upon them certain forms and traditions that function rather like a genetic imprint.
>
> (*ibid.*)

Besides Das, social anthropologist George J. Kunnath and many others brought out factual stories. Kunnath has examined both the achievements and the contradictions of the Naxalite movement "via the life story of a Naxalite—an organic intellectual—from the Dalit community" (2006, 89). The greater part of Kunnath's well-researched, factual account has been told in much the same way that fiction is narrated. The account is based on his field study of a village in Jehanabad, undertaken during 2002–2003. He describes the dress and the persona of the Dalit individual he befriended,

> He was sitting with more than a hundred people who had gathered in Dumari for a village meeting. In a torn vest and faded yellow *dhoti*, he was wholly unlike the Indian *netajis* who paraded themselves in their trademark *kurta pajama*. I sat with him on a bundle of straw in the village square, and began a conversation with him.
>
> (*ibid.*)

Kunnath takes note of the language and terminology used by ordinary Naxalite activists. He says, "In order to understand the views, arguments and actions of Rajubhai […], it is first necessary to locate them all in their historical and geographical contexts" (*ibid.*, 91). In his conversations with Kunnath, the real life character Rājū (Kunnath has changed the names of the main character and the village) uses terms such as *mazdoor varg* (working class), *bhoomiheen mazdoor* (landless laborers), *shoshit varg* (oppressed classes), *samanthi* (feudal), *varg sangharsh* (class struggle), etc.

A novelist should also be expected to script the dialogues of his characters in accordance with the contextual realities of the story, including the location and class position of the characters. But a reader does not come across such defining and frequently used terminology or such expressions in the conversations of the fictionalized characters in *Dẖamak*. The author fails to write contextually realistic conversations, although he himself specially emphasized the exploration of realism in writing during a conversation with Humayun Ashraf. Asked whether a story writer depicts a true picture of society, Abdus Samad emphatically said,

> "Yes, but not like a photographer, whose camera can capture only the apparent and visible; writers can also delve deeper into the realities." And when asked the difference between story and history, he says, "story is a

> more powerful medium than history because a historian can't record human feelings as successfully."
>
> (qtd. in Rashīd 2007, 148)

Dẖamak also fails to provide a visual description of the village, the dress and food habits, and other similar cultural details that would provide context. In short, the novel lacks "local color": the setting, dialect, customs, dress and ways of thinking and feeling which are characteristic of the region are missing. Abdus Samad only provides such details at a later stage when his fictional Rājū migrates to the provincial capital, after being forced out of a Naxalite group, and rises to become a government minister.

At a time of political crisis, arising because of inter-factional rivalries and inter-party defections which created instability, the chief minister whose face Rājū had blackened, in order to save his own position, puts up Rājū in a luxury hotel where he is shown indulging in sexual pleasures with a call girl. The girl happens to be one of the rape victims from Rājū's own village Bhagwanpur—the very case that Rājū had daringly protested by blackening the face of the minister. In this part of the story Abdus Samad takes great care to provide imagery, figurative language, and picturesque narrative to reveal many things about the luxuriousness of the hotel and the beauty of the call girl, and many sensuous expressions are used along the way as well. Here he does not fail to demonstrate his creativity in describing details. His novel almost begins to sound like substandard, pulp fiction, like a spicy novel. The contrast between his descriptions of the two different environments Rājū occupies suggests that Abdus Samad, as a novelist, is more sensitized to the luxurious, corrupt lifestyle of an individual Dalit politician than to the kind of exploitative and inhuman living conditions in which the vast majority of Dalits are forced to live in rural Bihar. This contradicts his own statements about the things that motivate him to write stories. He says, "It is extremely necessary for me to write because whatever happens around us, and whatever we feel about those events, I must share; in other words, to me writing is just like breathing, without which one can't live" (Shāhī 2005, 411).

Qurratulain Hyder's *Ākhir-e Shab kē Hamsafar* succeeds in describing such contextual details in a manner that makes the locale and activities as clear to the reader as possible, despite the fact that Hyder almost certainly had neither met individuals nor visited the locales of such underground movements. To recreate those details, she has largely used her own imaginative skills.

Dẖamak might have succeeded in recapturing the world of the

Naxalite-affected Dalit villages of Bihar if the author had made use of their folklore, their songs, their proverbs and popular sayings. This has been done with some success in an autobiographical novel written not by a professional fiction writer but by a social scientist, Arvind N. Das (1949–2000). His is a meticulously, well-researched piece covering the socio-anthropological history of three centuries of his ancestral village of Changel in the Aurai-Katra region of Muzaffarpur (North Bihar). Among the sayings and slogans he quotes, for example, are:

> *Cham cham chamkey hasua pyara, jhume baali dhaan ki,*
> *Jai ho isi nisaan ki, jai majdoor kisan ki*
> The sickle sparkles and the sheaf of paddy sways;
> Victory to this symbol, victory to the workers and peasants
>
> (1996, 141–42; 1987, 54)

Similarly, the *bidesia* folk songs of Bhikhari Thakur might have been used by Abdus Samad to convey the feelings and aspirations of the activists. Kunnath's real life Raju tells us, "While in the movement I used to move from village to village, creating awareness about the need to fight against oppression. Songs were a good medium and I was a good singer" (2006, 99). These types of cultural capital may have been preserved by those aligned with the "New Left." For instance, Chandrashekhar—the revolutionary student leader from JNU—did his research on the *bidesia* folk songs of Bhikhari Thakur. The lack of *manẓar kashī* (or *manẓar nigārī*, i.e., picturesque scenic details) in *Dẖamak* results in a failure of the novel as a "narrative of pain." The novel is a disappointment because it fails to give us any details about the realities of the rural poor Dalits in the Naxalite-affected areas of Bihar.

In contrast, other novels on similar subjects do a much better job in this regard. For example, Ilyās Aḥmad Gaddī's famous novel on the dirty world of the coal mafia and the woeful exploitation of the mineworkers, *Fire Area* (1996). This novel provides the precise and minute details of the lives and feelings of the mineworkers of Dhanbad (Jharkhand, until the year 2000 it was the southern part of Bihar). The specific language used by various characters is in conformity with their social position. There is also one character, Majumdar, a left-inspired trade union leader who provides ideological, tactical and organizational support to the two main characters—a mine worker's widowed wife and orphaned son. All the necessary cultural details about the workers living in Dhanbad, but also of the region from where they come (the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh). Gaddī even deferred the publication of his novel *Baghair Āsmān kī Zamīn* (An Earth Without Sky) because he felt at

the time he was not able to adequately depict the precise socio-cultural details of the subject/locale/social group he intended to portray in it (Rashīd 1997, 32). Similarly, no real-life leader of the extreme left—from Jagdish Mahto to Rameshwar Prasad to A. K. Roy, Chandrashekhar and Kunnath's Raju—degenerated into involvement in "lucrative" and "corrupt establishmentarian" politics. Although it cannot be denied that a section of the support-base (not leaders, beyond one or two isolated cases whose political careers certainly do not resemble Rājū's in *Dẖamak*) of the revolutionary left has switched over to the party in power. Neshat Quaisar of Jamia Millia Islamia remarks,

> It was the revolutionary left forces that organized the Dalit peasantry and challenged the hegemony of the landowning upper and intermediate castes. They provided the Dalits with voice and courage. But when it came to reaping the fruits [state power] of those heroic struggles, they failed in consolidating their own mass base in order to translate those struggles into power; ultimately the [non-Congress] "Janata" men [not the traditional Left] reaped the fruit.
>
> (Personal conversation, 13 August 2002)

There are certainly reasons to expect that an award-winning novelist cum political scientist such as Abdus Samad would take the time to become familiar with all of the realities he intends to write about, either through direct interaction with individual Naxalites or through well-known accounts in academic publications and popular periodicals. All novelists, we are told, engage in such research in order to enter into the "worlds" and "minds" of the characters they craft for their stories. This is why it is claimed that literature is a significant source for witnessing the shifting nature of identities just as it is a viable genre to study the ideological construction of narratives. Novelists employ historical perspectives to explain, and even influence, contemporary reality.

The fact that Abdus Samad neglected to do this has resulted in a very weak, superficial narration of the ideological and tactical conflict between two of his *Dẖamak* characters, Rājū and Sundrī (one of the seven rape victims who became a "Naxalite"). This conflict exemplifies the author's ignorance about such conflicts among the various groups of the extreme Left. The first and only conversation between the doctor (the leader of the extremist/Naxalite group) and Rājū, a field activist of the revolutionary organization, is also weak and superficial. The doctor is not shown to be educating and motivating the group members with deep ideological moorings articulated in an easy-to-understand manner. He is shown to exhort Rājū merely by saying that "the objectives we are pursuing are not our personal goals, this is a social movement, and we should be prepared

to make whatever sacrifice is required" (119).

Similarly, the conversation between the doctor and a police officer at the time of an "encounter" killing is also extremely weak. It fails miserably in articulating the grievances of the extremist movement against the social abuse of Dalit women, the atrocities of the local landlords, and the connivance of the state machinery with the perpetrators of these atrocities. The doctor only tells the police officer,

> "The British declared even Tilak and Nehru dreaded criminals, but were they really? Wasn't their objective just to free their country from foreign oppressors? We want to liberate it from native oppressors, what's the difference between them and us?"
>
> (143)

The argument is so superficial that it is hardly convincing enough to win the police officer over to the side of the Naxalites, as occurs later in the story.

The characters of both the doctor and the police officer are superficial and this makes their roles in the story vague and unconvincing. Whereas, as mentioned earlier, the author has gone into considerable detail in depicting the appearance, the tone, the jargon, etc. of the personal assistants of the ministers (such as Mahēsh and Rājak), who are shown to be the prime movers in all kinds of unscrupulous political machinations, no such techniques are applied when trying to convey the ideology and praxis of the Naxalite group members.

In reading historical accounts on the subject, one can find police and administrative officers (such as Shiv Chandra Jha, Manoj Srivastav, Vyas, etc.) who through their words and deeds occasionally demonstrated some concern for the economic roots of the Naxalite brutalities (Urmilesh 1999, 173–75), but none of them left their services to join the Naxalites. Nevertheless the novelist does have the freedom to create a fictive/imaginative reality. But if Abdus Samad had to create such a police officer, he should have taken the trouble to study the lives of real officers who, if they did point out the roots of caste violence in the terribly unequal landholding patterns or publicized the inhuman stories of the negligence of the police and the legal establishment against the perpetrators of anti-Dalit massacres, were subjected to transfers and other retaliations (*ibid.*, 174–75).

Critics have pointed to other weaknesses of the novel. For example, Aiʿjāz ʿAlī Arshad questions the believability of Sundrī rising to become the leader of the Naxalite group when so many other competent, senior members (such as Shyām and the police officer-turned-Naxalite) were available (2005, 460). Rājū's exit from the organization because of Sundrī's

politics of mindless and ideologically disoriented revenge is also questionable (163–74).

In fact, most of the first half of the novel centers on the subject of such struggles, whereas almost the whole of the second half centers on the deep degeneration going on in mainstream power politics. In my view, the narrative does not create a logical coherence between the two strands—namely, the politics of change through ideologically informed extremist organizations and corrupt mainstream power politics. The two are not blended properly and the novel remains unconvincing to the reader.

In short, Abdus Samad's attempt at a fictional representation of the degeneration of mainstream politics by depicting the journey of the central character from Naxalite Dalit activism into the mainstream fails to capture the political and cultural details of the life of the Dalits of rural Bihar. It also fails to portray the ideological mindset, the organizational arrangements and the tactical functioning of such extremist groups, whose presence in Bihar has been quite significant for the last four decades.

Some have expressed their strong disagreement with this manner of subjecting a novel to criticism from the perspective of "social realism." I would submit that: (a) disallowing this kind of criticism curbs the freedom of the critic and (b) when a novel is depicting a social reality, such as political activities, it is quite justified to critique the misrepresentation of that reality. I, however, do agree with the view that unlike history, the fictional universe should not have to depend strictly on historical evidence (Gossman 1990, 248; Amarakeerthi 2003, 28–29). ❑

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