

Novels, Society and History



In the previous chapter you read about the rise of print culture and how new forms of communication reshaped the way people thought about themselves or related to each other. You also saw how print culture created the possibility of new forms of literature. In this chapter we will study the history of one such form – the novel – a history that is closely connected to the making of modern ways of thinking. We will first look at the history of the novel in the West, and then see how this form developed in some of the regions of India. As you will see, despite their differences, there were many commonalities of focus between novels written in different parts of the world.

issued in six volumes priced at three shillings each – which was more than what a labourer earned in a week.

But soon, people had easier access to books with the introduction of circulating libraries in 1740. Technological improvements in printing brought down the price of books and innovations in marketing led to expanded sales. In France, publishers found that they could make super profits by hiring out novels by the hour. The novel was one of the first mass-produced items to be sold. There were several reasons for its popularity. The worlds created by novels were absorbing and believable, and seemingly real. While reading novels, the reader was transported to another person's world, and began looking at life as it was experienced by the characters of the novel. Besides, novels allowed individuals the pleasure of reading in private, as well as the joy of publicly reading or discussing stories with friends or relatives. In rural areas people would collect to hear one of them reading a novel aloud, often becoming deeply involved in the lives of the characters. Apparently, a group at Slough in England were very pleased to hear that Pamela, the heroine of Richardson's popular novel, had got married in their village. They rushed out to the parish church and began to ring the church bells!

In 1836 a notable event took place when Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* was **serialised** in a magazine. Magazines were attractive since they were illustrated and cheap. Serialisation allowed readers to relish the suspense, discuss the characters of a novel and live for weeks with their stories – like viewers of television soaps today!

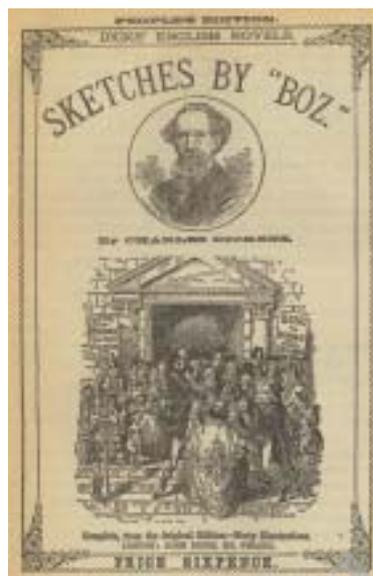


Fig. 1 – Cover page of Sketches by 'Boz'. Charles Dickens's first publication was a collection of journalistic essays entitled *Sketches by 'Boz'* (1836).

New words

Serialised – A format in which the story is published in instalments, each part in a new issue of a journal

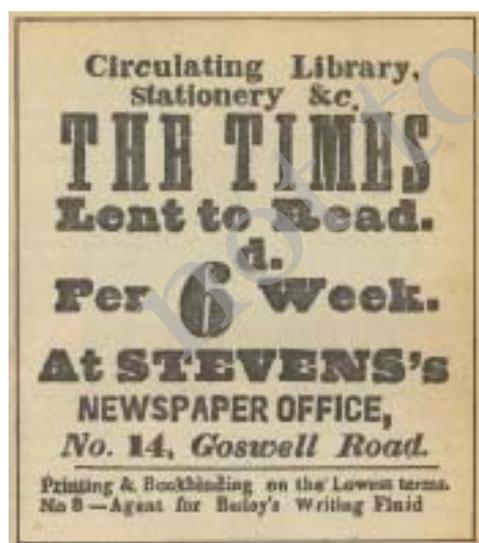


Fig. 2 – Library notice. Libraries were well publicised.



Fig. 3 – Cover page of All The Year Round. The most important feature of the magazine *All the Year Round*, edited by Charles Dickens, was his serialised novels. This particular issue begins with one.

In other novels too, Dickens focused on the terrible conditions of urban life under industrial capitalism. His *Oliver Twist* (1838) is the tale of a poor orphan who lived in a world of petty criminals and beggars. Brought up in a cruel workhouse (see Fig. 6), Oliver was finally adopted by a wealthy man and lived happily ever after. But not all novels about the lives of the poor gave readers the comfort of a happy ending. Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885) on the life of a young miner in France explores in harsh detail the grim conditions of miners' lives. It ends on a note of despair: the strike the hero leads fails, his co-workers turn against him, and hopes are shattered.



Fig. 6 – A hungry Oliver asks for more food while other children at the workhouse look on with fear, illustration in *Oliver Twist*.



Fig. 7 – Emile Zola, painting by Edward Manet, 1868.
Manet's portrait of the French author Zola, showing the novelist at his worktable in an intimate and thoughtful relationship with books.

1.3 Community and Society

The vast majority of readers of the novel lived in the city. The novel created in them a feeling of connection with the fate of rural communities. The nineteenth-century British novelist Thomas Hardy, for instance, wrote about traditional rural communities of England

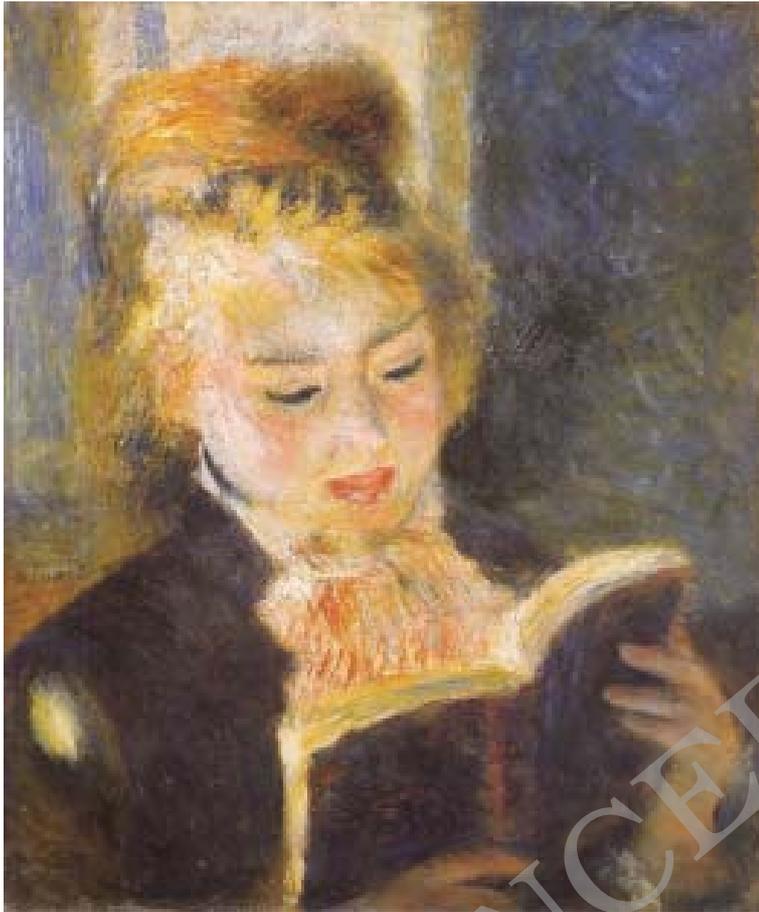


Fig. 9 – A girl reading, a painting by Jean Renoir (1841-1919).
By the nineteenth century, images of women reading silently, in the privacy of the room, became common in European paintings.



'MY WIFE IS A WOMAN OF MIND.'

Fig. 10 – The home of a woman author, by George Cruikshank.
When women began writing novels many people feared that they would now neglect their traditional role as wives and mothers and homes would be in disorder.

Aunt who is always unkind to her: 'People think you a good woman, but you are bad ... You are deceitful! I will never call you aunt as long as I live.'

Box 1

Women novelists

George Eliot (1819-1880) was the pen-name of Mary Ann Evans. A very popular novelist, she believed that novels gave women a special opportunity to express themselves freely. Every woman could see herself as capable of writing fiction:

'Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men ... No educational restrictions can shut women from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art that is so free from rigid requirements.'

George Eliot, 'Silly novels by lady novelists', 1856.



Fig. 13 – Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855).

1.5 Novels for the Young

Novels for young boys idealised a new type of man: someone who was powerful, assertive, independent and daring. Most of these novels were full of adventure set in places remote from Europe. The colonisers appear heroic and honourable – confronting 'native' peoples and strange surroundings, adapting to native life as well as changing it, colonising territories and then developing nations there. Books like R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) or Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) became great hits.

G.A. Henty's historical adventure novels for boys were also wildly popular during the height of the British empire. They aroused the excitement and adventure of conquering strange lands. They were set in Mexico, Alexandria, Siberia and many other countries. They were always about young boys who witness grand historical events, get involved in some military action and show what they called 'English' courage.

Love stories written for adolescent girls also first became popular in this period, especially in the US, notably *Ramona* (1884) by Helen Hunt Jackson and a series entitled *What Katy Did* (1872) by Sarah Chauncey Woolsey, who wrote under the pen-name Susan Coolidge.

Box 2

G.A. Henty (1832-1902):

In *Under Drake's Flag* (1883) two young Elizabethan adventurers face their apparently approaching death, but still remember to assert their Englishness:

'Well, Ned, we have had more good fortune than we could have expected. We might have been killed on the day when we landed, and we have spent six jolly months in wandering together as hunters on the plain. If we must die, let us behave like Englishmen and Christians.'

2 The Novel Comes to India

Stories in prose were not new to India. Banabhatta's *Kadambari*, written in Sanskrit in the seventh century, is an early example. The Panchatantra is another. There was also a long tradition of prose tales of adventure and heroism in Persian and Urdu, known as *dastan*.

However, these works were not novels as we know them today. The modern novel form developed in India in the nineteenth century, as Indians became familiar with the Western novel. The development of the vernaculars, print and a reading public helped in this process. Some of the earliest Indian novels were written in Bengali and Marathi. The earliest novel in Marathi was Baba Padmanji's *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857), which used a simple style of storytelling to speak about the plight of widows. This was followed by Lakshman Moreshwar Halbe's *Muktamala* (1861). This was not a realistic novel; it presented an imaginary 'romance' narrative with a moral purpose.

Leading novelists of the nineteenth century wrote for a cause. Colonial rulers regarded the contemporary culture of India as inferior. On the other hand, Indian novelists wrote to develop a modern literature of the country that could produce a sense of national belonging and cultural equality with their colonial masters.

Translations of novels into different regional languages helped to spread the popularity of the novel and stimulated the growth of the novel in new areas.

2.1 The Novel in South India

Novels began appearing in south Indian languages during the period of colonial rule. Quite a few early novels came out of attempts to translate English novels into Indian languages. For example, O. Chandu Menon, a subjudge from Malabar, tried to translate an English novel called *Henrietta Temple* written by Benjamin Disraeli into Malayalam. But he quickly realised that his readers in Kerala were not familiar with the way in which the characters in English novels lived: their clothes, ways of speaking, and manners were unknown to them. They would find a direct translation of an English novel dreadfully boring. So, he gave up this idea and wrote instead a story in Malayalam in the 'manner of English novel books'. This delightful novel called *Indulekha*, published in 1889, was the first modern novel in Malayalam.

Box 3

Not all Marathi novels were realistic. Naro Sadashiv Risbud used a highly ornamental style in his Marathi novel *Manjughosha* (1868). This novel was filled with amazing events. Risbud had a reason behind his choice of style. He said:

'Because of our attitude to marriage and for several other reasons one finds in the lives of the Hindus neither interesting views nor virtues ... If we write about things that we experience daily there would be nothing enthralling about them, so that if we set out to write an entertaining book we are forced to take up with the marvellous.'



Fig. 14 – Chandu Menon (1847-1899).

their own cultural identity. The world of colonial modernity seems to be both frightening and irresistible to the characters. The novel tries to teach the reader the ‘right way’ to live and expects all ‘sensible men’ to be worldly-wise and practical, to remain rooted in the values of their own tradition and culture, and to live with dignity and honour.

In the novel we see the characters attempting to bridge two different worlds through their actions: they take to new agricultural technology, modernise trading practices, change the use of Indian languages, making them capable of transmitting both Western sciences and Indian wisdom. The young are urged to cultivate the ‘healthy habit’ of reading the newspapers. But the novel emphasises that all this must be achieved without sacrificing the traditional values of the middle-class household. With all its good intentions, *Pariksha-Guru* could not win many readers, as it was perhaps too moralising in its style.

The writings of Devaki Nandan Khatri created a novel-reading public in Hindi. His best-seller, *Chandrakanta* – a romance with dazzling elements of fantasy – is believed to have contributed immensely in popularising the Hindi language and the Nagari script among the educated classes of those times. Although it was apparently written purely for the ‘pleasure of reading’, this novel also gives some interesting insights into the fears and desires of its reading public.

It was with the writing of Premchand that the Hindi novel achieved excellence. He began writing in Urdu and then shifted to Hindi, remaining an immensely influential writer in both languages. He drew on the traditional art of *kissa-goi* (storytelling). Many critics think that his novel *Sevasadan* (The Abode of Service), published in 1916, lifted the Hindi novel from the realm of fantasy, moralising and simple entertainment to a serious reflection on the lives of ordinary people and social issues. *Sevasadan* deals mainly with the poor condition of women in society. Issues like child marriage and dowry are woven into the story of the novel. It also tells us about the ways in which the Indian upper classes used whatever little opportunities they got from colonial authorities to govern themselves.

2.3 Novels in Bengal

In the nineteenth century, the early Bengali novels lived in two worlds. Many of these novels were located in the past, their characters, events

Discuss

Write about two important characteristics of the early Hindi novel.

Box 4

The novel in Assam

The first novels in Assam were written by missionaries. Two of them were translations of Bengali including *Phulmoni* and *Karuna*. In 1888, Assamese students in Kolkata formed the Asamya Bhasar Unnatisadhan that brought out a journal called *Jonaki*. This journal opened up the opportunities for new authors to develop the novel. Rajanikanta Bardoloi wrote the first major historical novel in Assam called *Manomati* (1900). It is set in the Burmese invasion, stories of which the author had probably heard from old soldiers who had fought in the 1819 campaign. It is a tale of two lovers belonging to two hostile families who are separated by the war and finally reunited.

3 Novels in the Colonial World

If we follow the history of the novel in different parts of India we can see many regional peculiarities. But there were also recurring patterns and common concerns. What inspired the authors to write novels? Who read the novels? How did the culture of reading develop? How did the novels grapple with the problems of societal change within a colonial society? What kind of a world did novels open up for the readers? Let us explore some of these questions by focusing primarily on the writings of three authors from different regions: Chandu Menon, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Premchand.

3.1 Uses of the Novel

Colonial administrators found ‘vernacular’ novels a valuable source of information on native life and customs. Such information was useful for them in governing Indian society, with its large variety of communities and castes. As outsiders, the British knew little about life inside Indian households. The new novels in Indian languages often had descriptions of domestic life. They showed how people dressed, their forms of religious worship, their beliefs and practices, and so on. Some of these books were translated into English, often by British administrators or Christian missionaries.

Indians used the novel as a powerful medium to criticise what they considered defects in their society and to suggest remedies. Writers like Viresalingam used the novel mainly to propagate their ideas about society among a wider readership.

Novels also helped in establishing a relationship with the past. Many of them told thrilling stories of adventures and intrigues set in the past. Through glorified accounts of the past, these novels helped in creating a sense of national pride among their readers.

At the same time, people from all walks of life could read novels so long as they shared a common language. This helped in creating a sense of collective belonging on the basis of one’s language.

You would have noticed that people living in different regions speak the same language in different ways – sometimes they use different words for the same thing; sometimes the same word is pronounced differently. With the coming of novels, such variations entered the

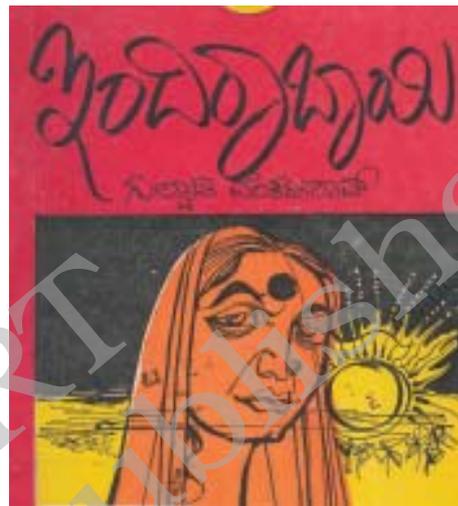


Fig. 18 – Cover page of the novel Indirabai.
Written at the end of the nineteenth century, Indirabai continues to be popular and is regularly reprinted. This is the cover of a recent reprint.

Box 6

The message of reform

Many early novels carried a clear message of social reform. For example, in *Indirabai*, a Kannada novel written by Gulavadi Venkata Rao in 1899, the heroine is given away in marriage at a very young age to an elderly man. Her husband dies soon after, and she is forced to lead the life of a widow. In spite of opposition from her family and society, Indirabai succeeds in continuing her education. Eventually she marries again, this time a progressive, English-educated man. Women’s education, the plight of widows, and problems created by the early marriage of girls – all these were important issues for social reformers in Karnataka at that time.

He was also a 'first-rate Sanskrit scholar'. He dressed in Western clothes. But, at the same time, he kept a long tuft of hair, according to the Nayar custom.

The heroes and heroines in most of the novels were people who lived in the modern world. Thus they were different from the ideal or mythological characters of the earlier poetic literature of India. Under colonial rule, many of the English-educated class found new Western ways of living and thinking attractive. But they also feared that a wholesale adoption of Western values would destroy their traditional ways of living. Characters like Indulekha and Madhavan showed readers how Indian and foreign lifestyles could be brought together in an ideal combination.

3.3 Pleasures of Reading

As elsewhere in the world, in India too, the novel became a popular medium of entertainment among the middle class. The circulation of printed books allowed people to amuse themselves in new ways. Picture books, translations from other languages, popular songs sometimes composed on contemporary events, stories in newspapers and magazines – all these offered new forms of entertainment. Within this new culture of print, novels soon became immensely popular.

In Tamil, for example, there was a flood of popular novels in the early decades of the twentieth century. Detective and mystery novels often had to be printed again and again to meet the demand of readers: some of them were reprinted as many as twenty-two times!

The novel also assisted in the spread of silent reading. We are so used to reading in silence that it is difficult for us to think that this practice was not very common in the past. As late as the nineteenth century and perhaps even in the early twentieth century, written texts were often read aloud for several people to hear. Sometimes novels were also read in this way, but in general novels encouraged reading alone and in silence. Individuals sitting at home or travelling in trains enjoyed them. Even in a crowded room, the novel offered a special world of imagination into which the reader could slip, and be all alone. In this, reading a novel was like daydreaming.

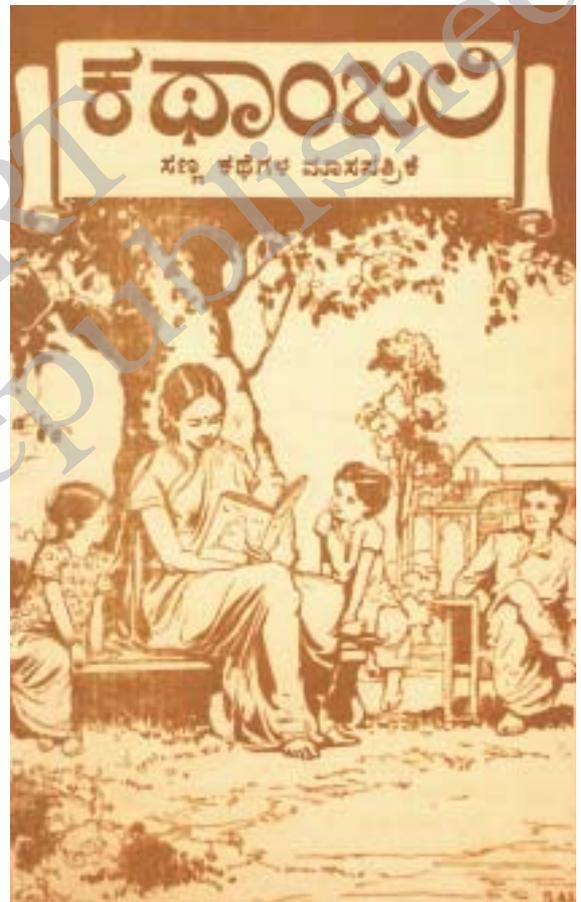


Fig. 20 – Cover page of Kathanjali, a Kannada magazine. Kathanjali started publication in 1929 and published short stories regularly. The picture shows a mother reading out stories from a book to her children.

It is not surprising that many men were suspicious of women writing novels or reading them. This suspicion cut across communities. Hannah Mullens, a Christian missionary and the author of *Karuna o Phulmonir Bibaran* (1852), reputedly the first novel in Bengali, tells her readers that she wrote in secret. In the twentieth century, Sailabala Ghosh Jaya, a popular novelist, could only write because her husband protected her. As we have seen in the case of the south, women and girls were often discouraged from reading novels.

Box 8

Women with books

'These days we can see women in black bordered sarees with massive books in their hands, walking inside their houses. Often seeing them with these books in hand, their brothers or husbands are seized with fear – in case they are asked for meanings.'

Sadharani, 1880.

4.1 Caste Practices, 'Lower-Castes' and Minorities

As you have seen, *Indulekha* was a love story. But it was also about an issue that was hotly debated at the time when the novel was written. This concerned the marriage practices of upper-caste Hindus in Kerala, especially the Nambuthiri Brahmins and the Nayars. Nambuthiris were also major landlords in Kerala at that time; and a large section of the Nayars were their tenants. In late-nineteenth-century Kerala, a younger generation of English-educated Nayar men who had acquired property and wealth on their own, began arguing strongly against Nambuthiri alliances with Nayar women. They wanted new laws regarding marriage and property.

The story of *Indulekha* is interesting in the light of these debates. Suri Nambuthiri, the foolish landlord who comes to marry Indulekha, is the focus of much satire in the novel. The intelligent heroine rejects him and chooses Madhavan, the educated and handsome Nayar as her husband, and the young couple move to Madras, where Madhavan joins the civil service. Suri Nambuthiri, desperate to find a partner for himself, finally marries a poorer relation from the same family and goes away pretending that he has married Indulekha! Chandu Menon clearly wanted his readers to appreciate the new values of his hero and heroine and criticise the ignorance and immorality of Suri Nambuthiri.

Novels like *Indirabai* and *Indulekha* were written by members of the upper castes, and were primarily about upper-caste characters. But not all novels were of this kind.

Potheri Kunjambu, a 'lower-caste' writer from north Kerala, wrote a novel called *Saraswativijayam* in 1892, mounting a strong attack on caste oppression. This novel shows a young man from an 'untouchable' caste, leaving his village to escape the cruelty of his Brahmin landlord. He converts to Christianity, obtains modern

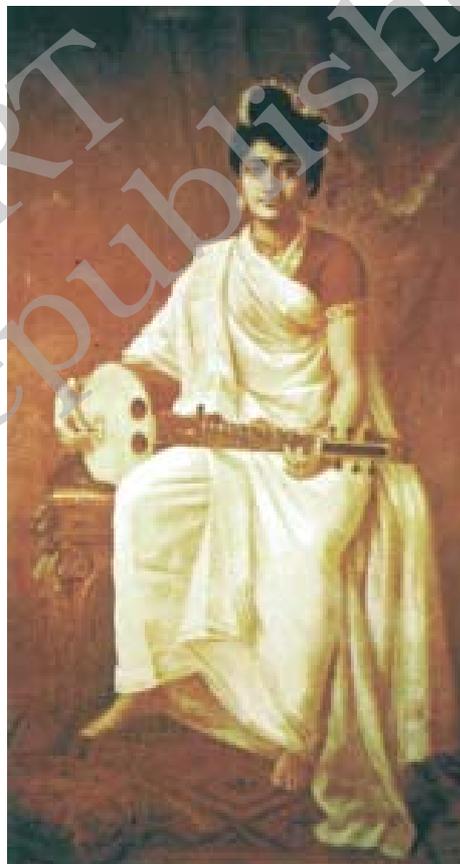


Fig. 22 – Malabar Beauty, painting by Ravi Varma.

Chandu Menon thought that the novel was similar to new trends in Indian painting.

One of the foremost oil painters of this time was Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). Chandu Menon's description of his heroines may have been guided by some of his paintings.

5 The Nation and its History

The history written by colonial historians tended to depict Indians as weak, divided, and dependent on the British. These histories could not satisfy the tastes of the new Indian administrators and intellectuals. Nor did the traditional Puranic stories of the past – peopled by gods and demons, filled with the fantastic and the supernatural – seem convincing to those educated and working under the English system. Such minds wanted a new view of the past that would show that Indians could be independent minded and had been so in history. The novel provided a solution. In it, the nation could be imagined in a past that also featured historical characters, places, events and dates.

In Bengal, many historical novels were about Marathas and Rajputs. These novels produced a sense of a pan-Indian belonging. They imagined the nation to be full of adventure, heroism, romance and sacrifice – qualities that could not be found in the offices and streets of the nineteenth-century world. The novel allowed the colonised to give shape to their desires. Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's (1827-94) *Anguriya Binimoy* (1857) was the first historical novel written in Bengal. Its hero Shivaji engages in many battles against a clever and treacherous Aurangzeb. Man Singh persuades Shivaji to make peace with Aurangzeb. Realising that Aurangzeb intended to confine him as a house prisoner, Shivaji escapes and returns to battle. What gives him courage and tenacity is his belief that he is a nationalist fighting for the freedom of Hindus.

The imagined nation of the novel was so powerful that it could inspire actual political movements. Bankim's *Anandamath* (1882) is a novel about a secret Hindu militia that fights Muslims to establish a Hindu kingdom. It was a novel that inspired many kinds of freedom fighters.

Many of these novels also reveal the problems of thinking about the nation. Was India to be a nation of only a single religious community? Who had natural claims to belong to the nation?

5.1 The Novel and Nation Making

Imagining a heroic past was one way in which the novel helped in popularising the sense of belonging to a common nation. Another

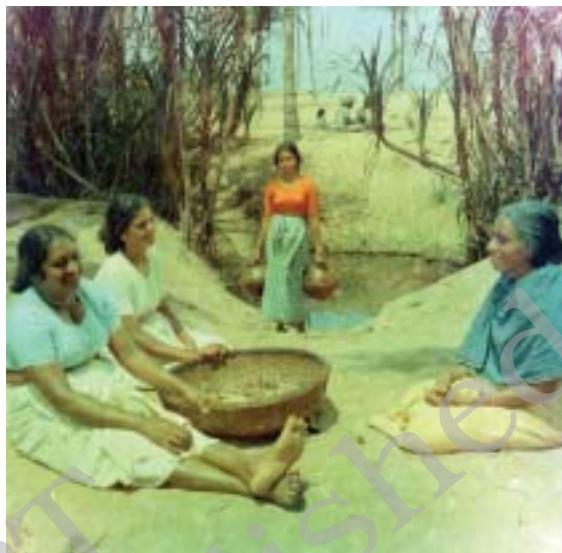


Fig. 24 – Image from the film Chemmeen. Many novels were made into films. The novel Chemmeen (*Shrimp*, 1956), written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-99), is set in the fishing community in Kerala, and characters speak a variety of Malayalam used by fisherfolk in the region. The film Chemmeen, directed by Ramu Kariat, was made in 1965.



Fig. 25 – A still from the Kannada film Chomana Dudi (Choma's Drum, directed by B.V. Karanth in 1975). The film is based on a novel of the same title written in 1930 by the celebrated Kannada novelist Sivarama Karanth (1902-1997).

Conclusion

We have seen how, over the course of its history in both the West and in India, the novel became part of the lives of different sections of people. Developments in print technologies allowed the novel to break out of its small circle of readers and introduced fresh ways of reading. But through their stories, novels have also shown a capacity to include and focus on the lives of those who were not often known to literate and middle-class circles. We have seen some examples of these in Premchand, but they are equally present in the works of other novelists.

Bringing together people from varied backgrounds produces a sense of shared community. The most notable form of this community is the nation. Equally significant is the fact that by bringing in both the powerful and the marginal peoples and cultures, the novel throws up many questions about the nature of these communities. We can say then that novels produce a sense of sharing, and promote an understanding of different people, different values and different communities. At the same time they explore how different groups begin to question or reflect upon their own identities.

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