# LAND AS LEGISLATIVE SPACE IN VIKARAM SETH'S *A SUITABLE BOY* AND PHANISHWARNATH RENU'S *MAILĀ ĀNCHAL*

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Franco Moretti writes in *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* that there are two ways of looking at literary geography, that is, space within the novel, where 'the dominant is a fictional one' and space without, that is, 'real historical space' (1998: 3) such as the distribution of novels across public libraries or nations. This paper is an examination of the first type of space, the fictional representation of two villages in two novels, or more specifically, the agrarian relations in those villages.

The real historical space between the two novels is quite large. Phanishwarnath Renu's novel *Mailā ānchal*, translated into English as *The Soiled Border*, was published in Hindi in 1954. It is credited with establishing an entire genre that is named after it, the *ānchalik* novel, usually translated as the regional novel (Pandey 1974: 8). It is set in Bihar and covers the period that straddles Independence. Vikram Seth, whose previous and subsequent novels have not been set in India, published *A Suitable Boy* almost forty years later in English. His novel was the first of the new, post-Rushdie generation of Indian novels in English to depict rural life in any depth. The setting for the land narrative in *A Suitable Boy* is the fictional state of Purva Pradesh which Seth in an interview described as an amalgam of places from UP and Bihar (Woodward 1993: 32). The period in which *A Suitable Boy* is set overlaps with that of *Mailā ānchal* and encompasses the passing of land reform acts which aimed to break the power of the big landlords and so change the economics of a particular space, that is, agrarian land. By concentrating on the effects of legislation, which is only one strand of a matrix of narratives that defines agrarian space in these novels, I focus on relations between people and land as the primary determinant of a sense of place. Both novels share a depiction of a fault-line in relations between those who own substantial amounts of land and

those whose rights to land are insecure or who have no rights. Both agree that land-reform legislation did not radically alter this inequality in the period in which the novels are set. However, the space in which land reform intervenes is fictionalized in two quite different ways: in *Mailā ānchal* the village is primarily a communal space, whereas in *A Suitable Boy,* it is the setting for the actions of individuals.

The legislation in question is the abolition of the zamindari system. Zamindars were landlords who had the right to collect land revenue on behalf of the government. The words zamindar and zamindari come from the Perso-Arabic word for land, *zamīn*. Zamindari refers not only to the system of agrarian relations but also to the area controlled by a zamindar. Zamindaris were sometimes very large, encompassing scores of villages, but often some of the power would be vested in smaller landlords, and zamindaris would exist which had more or less the same boundaries as an individual village. In *A Suitable Boy* and *Mailā ānchal* the relevant action is set in village-sized zamindaris. Zamindars had the power to demand a certain amount of a tenant's produce in rent and revenue, and if they were not paid the tenant could be evicted from his land — the ultimate punishment (Spear 1990: 97). One of the promises on which the Congress Party, which formed the first government of Independent India, was elected was that they would abolish the zamindari system (Zaidi 1985: 33). There was a whole raft of measures, but importantly the tenant would get security of tenure for any field he had tilled for a certain number of years (usually twelve) and his rights would be more secure. It was hoped that a system, which had meant that a powerful minority held most of the power over most of the village land, was to be changed in favour of the majority who worked the land but had little power over it. The legislation was delayed by challenges in the courts[1] but was eventually enacted. However, it failed to make any significant improvement in the lives of the poorer farmers in the period in which these novels are set (Jannuzi 1994: 139).

The history books record many factors that lead to the failure of land reform in the years immediately following the Zamindari Abolition Act. The

legislation was limited, concentrated on shoring up the rights of tenant farmers and did little to improve the lot of labourers who had no rights to land (Merillat 1970: 120). The landlords also found ways to evade the legislation, by moving a tenant around so that he could not clock up the required number of years to gain occupancy rights (ibid.: 117-18), or by having the land records falsified (Jannuzi op.cit.:140). The Congress Party which had passed the legislation and which, in the states in which these novels are set, also made up much of the executive, was split on the issue of zamindari abolition. Much of the funding for the Congress Party came from the big landlords whom Congress could not afford to alienate (Khilnani 1997: 36) and indeed many landlords joined the party. The people whose job it was to enforce the legislation often did not do so because it was against their own personal interest. All these shortcomings of the legislation are fictionalized in one or other novel, many in both. The failure of land reform does not return the distribution of rights to land in the village to the status quo, instead, in both novels, the peasants actually end up worse off after the Zamindari Abolition Act than they were before it. The difference between the two novels does not lie in the content of the historical material on land reform that they make use of, because this is often similar, but rather in the way in which it is mediated in the world of the novel. I shall look first at *A Suitable Boy* and then *Mailā ānchal*.

*A Suitable Boy* is set in 1951 and 1952 during the years that the Zamindari Abolition Acts were becoming law. The framing of one of these acts, its subsequent challenge in court and its effect on a rural district forms one of the novel's plots. Seth splits the zamindari abolition sub-plot into two sites, the village of Debaria and the city of Brahmpur. The city-based narrative depicts the culture of musicians and courtesans which relied largely on the patronage of zamindars and whose existence was threatened by the abolition of the zamindari system. It also charts the passage of the Zamindari Abolition Bill through the courts of Brahmpur whilst having much fun at the expense of the legal profession.[2] We do not have space here for a consideration of the

attractive city-based narrative and must stick with the much more gloomy rural half of the zamindari abolition sub-plot. Treating one of the narrative strands in isolation as I do here, carries the risk of misrepresenting the novel as a whole. 'Rich and epical' (Wood 1993: 9) were two of the adjectives used to describe this novel in one review whereas I will be describing a space that is pared-down and sparsely charactered. The rural space in *A Suitable Boy*, which is only one of the two locations for a sub-plot, is necessarily less dense than the space in *Mailā ānchal* that forms the location for that entire novel. What is interesting is the effect such a representation of space has on the narrative.

The land reform narrative occurs wholly in the fictional state of Purva Pradesh (Eastern State) that bears a close resemblance to UP, called United Provinces under the British and Uttar Pradesh (or Northern State) after Independence. In the city the legislation is framed, passed, challenged in the courts and finally upheld. However, in the rural areas the legislation is ineffective and the lot of the peasant does not improve. As the narrative of reform moves from urban to rural space it becomes less optimistic. In the end the success in the city counts for little in the village. Maan Kapoor, son of the architect of the Zamindari Abolition Act, travels to the village of his friend Rasheed and sees there the effect of the legislation. When he first visits the village of Debaria, the Zamindari Abolition Act has not been passed. However, the zamindars, Rasheed's father and grandfather, are acting on the assumption that it will be and are planning accordingly. Kachheru, the family's senior worker, has tilled the same fields for years and so under the legislation would gain rights to the land but when Rasheed's father hears of the impending legislation he has the patwari, the keeper of land records, alter documents to show the field as having been tilled by Rasheed rather than Kachheru. Rasheed tries to ensure that the legislation can take effect by secretly visiting the patwari and having the records changed back again to show Kachheru as the tiller of the field. The patwari, suspecting that Rasheed's instructions may not be sanctioned by the rest of his family, alerts Rasheed's father. The family, furious at what they see as Rasheed's deceitful action, temporarily strip him of

any rights to inherit the land that would have been his; meanwhile they turn Kachheru off his fields and he becomes destitute. Kachheru pleads with his erstwhile master to relent but does not start a court case or initiate any other action to get back the land he had tilled for so long. Rasheed, having incurred the wrath of his family and inadvertently provoked the ruin of the man he was trying to protect, goes mad and later commits suicide. The zamindars are left with their land intact but no son to inherit it. This is the only major story in the novel to end in total disaster.

Historically, peasants *were* dispossessed and the immediate effect of land reform *was* a worsening of conditions for them. But why, in literary terms, is the novel tied to the more pessimistic side of history at this point? It is due to two things: the first is the passivity of the peasant, the second is the small number of characters used to represent the agrarian system and the resulting isolation of Kachheru. The narrative has a three-point structure with Rasheed's family lined up on one side, Kachheru's interests on the other and Rasheed in between. There are other narratives in *A Suitable Boy* that have a three-point structure, but in those the two opposing sides are brought to resolution. Indeed, in the city the land-story begins with events that invite sympathy for the beleaguered zamindars, then enacts the pro-zamindari abolition arguments and ends in a limited compromise with some of the excesses of the zamindars curbed but parts of their culture intact. This is not unlike a narrative structure outlined by Franco Moretti when he writes of novels with three agents, a hero, an antagonist and a 'third narrative pole' (op.cit.:108). The function of the third agent is often to intervene between two conflicting parties and bring about a compromise.[3] However, Kachheru's narrative does not fit the structure outlined by Moretti, a structure which can be seen in other narratives in *A Suitable Boy*. This is partly because of Rasheed's inability to reconcile the two factions because he is alienated from both of them, from his zamindar family by his city ways (socialist ideas and lax religious observance), and from the peasant by his failure to consult Kachheru before he has the land records changed. However, the absence of a resolution to the conflict over land is also

due to the passivity of Kachheru. Moretti stresses that the three agents are independent and autonomous, but Kachheru has no autonomy because he is too helpless and downtrodden. He cannot, therefore, function as a hero in the way envisaged by Moretti: he is not significant enough to compromise with.

The style in which Kachheru is portrayed, in two consecutive chapters, is significant. He is pinned down by passages of extended description about a typified peasant describing his poor accommodation, inadequate diet and back-breaking labour. By the end of a day's ploughing,

> his face was flushed red. His feet, callused and cracked though they were, felt as if they had been boiled. After a short day's work he usually shouldered the plough himself as he drove the cattle back from the fields. But he had no energy to do so today and gave it to the spent cattle to haul. Hardly a coherent thought formed itself in his mind. The metal of his spade, when it touched his shoulder accidentally, made him wince (Seth 1993: 534).

Unlike the rest of the book, and unlike *Mailā ānchal,* there are no discussions between characters. Kachheru, we are told, has never taken any action against his master on his own behalf. His passivity may be caused by his perception of powerlessness. Tenancy law introduced by the British and modified in the Zamindari Abolition Act envisaged named individuals having certain verifiable rights to land which could be protected by the courts. It did not acknowledge that the position of some farmers was too weak to enable them to take a stand as individuals. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in *Realism and Reality* writes that individualism caused some problems for early Indian novelists.

> In the rigidly hierarchical familial and social structure of nineteenth century India, individualism was not an easy quality to render in literature (Mukherjee 1994: 7).

In *A Suitable Boy*'s central narrative — the search of the heroine for a suitable boy — the limited marriage choices of 1950s India are reconciled with the conventions of the European novel: the heroine marries the man found for her by her mother but she *chooses* to marry him. Kachheru's lack of autonomy, on

the other hand, prevents him negotiating in any way with the zamindari system.

There was another possibility open to Seth that was to compensate for the erasure of Kachheru's subjecthood with the power of collective action. The extreme measures taken by the zamindars to avoid losing land under the Zamindari Abolition Act forced the peasants into collective action. However, the village is so sparsely charactered that this is not possible. If Kachheru were part of a group, the group might be able to obtain sufficient power in the village to make some choices or challenge the power of others and negotiate with them. He is unique amongst the principal characters of *A Suitable Boy* in having no friends, only a wife and an absent son. He is described as a Chamar but he is never portrayed with any others of his caste. This is reflected in the description of the village geography that is likewise individualistic and sparse. Locations for the action are: Rasheed's family home, Kachheru's hut, the patwari's office, the field that Kachheru works for Rasheed's father and the field where he has planted two trees. Some more places are mentioned including: a hut on lower ground that was liable to be flooded in the rains, several roads, a school and a mosque. There are no public spaces apart from the roads and this is in marked contrast to *Mailā ānchal* which features an ashram, a handloom centre, a platform for the panchayat (or village council) the doctor's surgery and malaria centre as well as the houses and fields of individuals.

The drama of landlord versus peasant is played out in the mind of just one character, Rasheed, who finds himself caught on the horns of a dilemma,

> torn between family shame and family pride, forced to choose between loyalty and justice, between trust and pity, what must he have been through? Was he too not a victim of the tragedy of the countryside (Seth op.cit.:1182).

The sense of tragedy in the social conflict is heightened by being contained within one character, but trying to sort these two codes within the mind of an individual rather than in society is impossible. When an individual mind is

asked to resolve something it cannot in this way the logical fictional outcome is madness, suicide, or in this case, both. One reviewer notes that the scene in which Rasheed commits suicide is 'so distasteful to the author that it is the shortest in the book' (Desai 1993: 25). Rasheed's suicide does not provide a resolution to the conflict in the land narrative. The situation is only negotiable within the dynamic of society. One side of this dynamic, the push for change from below, is missing in this novel because the space is too sparsely charactered to allow it to exist.

*Mailā ānchal,* is set in the fictional village of Maryganj, in the Purnea district of Bihar, from 1946 until a few months after Gandhi's death in April 1948. Although the Zamindari Abolition Act was not upheld by the courts until 1954, in the novel it is announced as having taken effect. As in *A Suitable Boy*, the legislation is depicted as failing. However, *Mailā ānchal* narrates legislation in a different way. Instead of the narrative starting in the city and moving to the village, it is located wholly inside the village. Legislation arrives from the town but it slots into pre-existing struggles for land and is used by different factions for their advantage. In contrast to *A Suitable Boy* the intended beneficiaries are not the passive recipients of legislation and they do act collectively.

The portrayal of economic and social relations in the village of Maryganj is extremely complex; the binary opposition between those who own land and everyone else does exist but it intersects with many other significant divisions, most importantly those of caste, political allegiance and relationship to land. The glossary to the English translation of the novel lists no fewer than twenty-six castes and sub-castes (Renu 1991: 333-52). The novel opens during a lull in the competition between the main castes, which has included rivalry over land. The Brahmins at the top of the hierarchy are a small minority, below them are the Rajputs and the Kayasths who are traditional rivals. The Yadavs, previously cowherds, have begun to move up the caste ladder and have bought land. Two Yadavs have become political leaders — Baldev of the village Congress Party and Kalicharan of the Socialists. The tribal Santhals live outside the village and

are not part of the caste system but they work village land and are therefore part of village society. Caste divisions intersect with the land hierarchy. The Hindi often indicates precise relationships to land as people are named sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, ploughmen, herdsmen and so on. [4]

It is into this complex matrix of power and land that legislation intervenes. Competition for land and disputes over it are common. Legislation is portrayed as coming from outside the village, from the cities of Purnea or Patna. Some of the reasons land reform is not successful lie, as was the case in *A Suitable Boy*, with the framing of the legislation and the corruption of some members of the Congress Party. But failure is caused as much by factionalism within the village as by corruption without.

The foremost issue amongst the poorer farmers is whether the use of force or the employment of legislation is the best way to obtain rights over land. Kalicharan and the other Socialists have been advocating the forced takeover of land. Kalicharan leads a group of people — ploughmen, herdsmen and agricultural labourers — who have no tie to any particular plot of land, and therefore stand to gain nothing from legislation which relies on an occupant having tilled the land continuously to accrue rights. In answer to this Baldev hands out leaflets for the Congress Party publicizing legislation that he says will allow tenants to gain tenancy rights.

The villagers comment on the pros and cons of legislation in Chapter 23, in a way that resembles a playscript at points, with unattributed comments and interruptions. The style of this chapter is in direct contrast to the block of descriptive prose used to narrate the peasant's day in *A Suitable Boy.* Whereas Kachheru is apparently oblivious of the legislation, the villagers of *Mailā ānhcal* engage with it. The comparison Hansen makes with Premchand's 1936 novel *Godān*, could equally be made with *A Suitable Boy.*

> This view of the caste system assists Renu in giving to his peasant characters a power and collective voice lacking in Premchand's peasants. Images [...] such as Bāldev leading impressive political procession to Purniya [...] contrast strongly with the image of Horī in

> *Godān,* silently working solitarily under the midday sun, bowed down by poverty, silently giving away his life-earnings to moneylenders and Brāhmans at every harvest (Hansen 1978: 41).

Chapter 23 resembles nothing so much as an extended conversation throughout the village, on various issues concerning land. Some villagers think Kalicharan's negative assessment of the legislation makes sense. Another, telling the story of a dance troupe who had visited the village and only been spurred to perform well when a rival troupe appeared, says that the competition between the Socialist and the Congress Party over the solution to the land problem will be good for the villagers.

The villagers do submit petitions under the legislation; the petitions are rejected but they try a second time, their hopes raised by the promise of zamindari abolition. The climax of the novel comes after the Santhals, who have also submitted petitions, find out that their applications have been rejected. Instead of their gaining rights to their land as they had expected, some of it is seized by the zamindar, Vishwanath Prasad. Emboldened by the premature rumour that the zamindari system has been abolished, and by Kalicharan's speeches, the Santhals attempt to take back seedlings they had planted on Vishwanath Prasad's land. The villagers, including the smaller farmers and sharecroppers, rush to the zamindar's defence and a pitch battle ensues. The Santhals are routed, four of their men are killed, women are raped and nine Santhals are subsequently tried and imprisoned. In Part II of the novel more and more land is transferred to Vishwanath Prasad's control until he becomes the only landlord and master in Maryganj. Land reform does not achieve its end of widening the control of land.

Both Kalicharan and Baldev stress the need for unity when talking to their followers and both are inclined to blame the failure of reform on divisions within the village. Ultimately there was one division that needed to be upheld in order to maintain the impetus for reform that was started by the competition between several different castes and classes, that is, between large landowners and everybody else.[5] When the Santhals attack Vishwanath Prasad's field this

division is not maintained. Although the Santhals, in so far as they are denied rights to the land they till, have much in common with the vast majority of the villagers, the villagers side with the landowner. The failure of solidarity amongst those without land is partly engineered by Vishwanath Prasad at a panchayat meeting two chapters previously. At the end of it the villagers have agreed not to pursue the security of tenancy that is their right under the new legislation. The Yadav leaders, Baldev and Kalicharan, accept this retrogressive step for various reasons. They concur with a speech by the zamindar in which he dissolves the distinctions between the different castes and political groups in the village and instead plants the idea that the Santhals are an external threat. By doing so he exacerbates and exploits the division between the villagers and the outsider Santhals[6] and arrests the dynamism of caste and political allegiance within the village that has been the driving force for land reform. The Yadav caste, which was at the forefront of changes, and which stood to gain most by using the legislation is swallowed up into the larger unit of the village which includes the zamindars it was previously agitating against. As a result it stops campaigning for land reform. The unity that Baldev and Kalicharan wanted in order to push for change has been achieved by the zamindar and used to prevent it. Kalicharan and Baldev testify in court against the Santhals and help to have them convicted for starting the riot. In the process the two political leaders sign papers in English that they do not understand. These papers include clauses that enable Vishwanath Prasad to gain complete control of the village's land. In this way the dispossessed villagers of Maryganj are not just the victims of forces too powerful for them to resist but are complicit in the divisions and violence that leads indirectly to their own dispossession.

Legislation fails in both novels but in very different ways. In *Mailā ānchal* the legislation intervenes in a community in which struggle for land was already causing disruption to the status quo. Those who stood to gain from land reform are on this occasion out-manoeuvred by the zamindar but they are not depicted as completely helpless. In *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, land

reform is a matter for individual characters and the landed have all the power, the landless none. I would like to conclude by tentatively suggesting a reason for the difference in the representation of rural space in these two novels. I have already referred to the limitations imposed on the rural space in *A Suitable Boy* by its status as just one setting of a sub-plot. This is part of a wider issue of readership. The passages describing Kachheru are eminently readable for a western, or western-novel reading public, used to what Lowe terms the classically plotted narrative.[7] The passages, written to move the reader to pity, are very affecting. Because they are purely descriptive they do not require much work on the part of the reader who, whether British, American or English-speaking Indian, is probably one or more generations removed from direct contact with agriculture. *Mailā ānchal* employs a wealth of agricultural detail and some familiarity with it is necessary for interpreting the novel. It is, however, not just the content that makes *Mailā āncal*, for a western-novel reader, a difficult novel. Partha Chatterjee, following on from Ranajit Guha has written that the 'principle of community [is] the unifying feature of peasant consciousness' (1999: 163). In order to represent the peasant as part of a community Renu has had to radically alter, if not blow apart, the traditional narrative style of a novel, predicated on the individual.[8] For a western-novel reader, Chapter 23, referred to above, has no clear narrative structure, no central character, drives towards no particular end and is rather a cacophony of voices. A reader has to be prepared to put in the work to stage this play in his or her head in order for it to cohere. Whether someone brought up reading Hindi literature would find this narrative style as new or as demanding has yet to be investigated. What seems clear is that the classically plotted novel restricts the depiction of north Indian rural space in a manner that affects the politics of its representation or, to put it the other way around, the representation of certain types of space in the novel requires a radically altered narrative form.

[1] Surajpal Singh v. State of Uttar Pradesh, A.I.R. 1952 S.C. 52; Visheshwar Rao v. State of Madhya Pradesh, 1952 S.C.R, 1020; State of Bihar v. Kameshwar Singh, A.I.R. 1952 S.C. 252, 262-63. Details taken from Merillat 1970:135.

[2] This is a world with which Seth is very familiar through his mother who, before retirement, was a judge in the High Court in Patna, Bihar.

[3] Here Moretti quotes Julien Freund who writes that 'the Third may appear in the course of a conflict, and modify its bilateral relation of forces [...] in general its intervention leads to the conclusion of the conflict, usually by way of a compromise' (op.cit.:109).

[4] In Hindi *adhiyā, bataiyādārī karnevāle kisān, majdur, halvāhā* and *carvāhā* (sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, ploughmen, herdsmen) (Renu 1997:119).

[5] Renu in an interview stated, 'on the one side there is the large group of landless peasantry, and on the other there are the farm owners' (Pandey op.cit.: 92).

[6] One historian has commented that the 'clash of interests within the villages is a powerful ally of the landowners, who can and do play the different groups against each other' (Myrdal quoted in Merillat op.cit.:123).

[7] See Lowe 2000 for an incisive account of the elements that the Western reader expects of a 'good' narrative. Refer to pp. 27-8 and 41-6 for an analysis of restrictions on place in a classically plotted narrative.

[8] See Watt 1957, in particular Chapter 1, and also Chapter 1 of Mukherjee 1994.

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