

Challenging the Hegemony: Tracing the Dalit Voices across Various Ages

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to trace those major struggles in the History of India which strengthened the Dalit voices/ identities in the society. The present form of Dalit literature is the outcome of various challenges posed by various personalities/systems from time to time to counter the caste-based oppression. A glimpse of History corroborates the fact that there have been resistance and assertion in a form or the other against the exploitation and discrimination did in the name of *Varna* system. As we know, Buddhism was the first religion which considered all human beings equal irrespective of their caste and birth. In a similar way, there have been other initiatives across various ages which have a substantial contribution to re/shaping the Dalit identity.

Keywords- *Dalit, Oppression, Hegemony, Identity, Untouchability, Resistance, Dominance*

Introduction

Dalit literature is the outcome of the oppression experienced by Dalits in the hands of unjust social order and caste-based inequalities. For thousands of years, Dalits have been exploited and oppressed in the name of purity and pollution. Dalit literature has challenged this demarcation of boundaries between pure and polluted, high and low, superior and inferior and so on. This paper is an attempt to trace various Dalit voices/movements in the history of India which confronted the biased social system and sought parity in the society irrespective of birth or caste of a human being. The origin of Dalit writing can be traced back to Buddhist literature. The role of Buddhism is important to be put in a perspective. Buddhism was the first religion which recognized the oppression of people on the basis of their caste and felt the need for their liberation. Though the resistance to the caste ideology began as soon as the caste came into existence, it is only Buddhism that gave complete confrontation to the Hindu dominance. Gautama Buddha's compassion for suffering humanity, his historic challenge to the uncivil social order made the untouchables follow Buddhism. Buddhism produced a cultural ideological synthesis within social reality and encouraged the untouchables to think independently. Buddhism introduced the idea of placing a higher value on morality and the equality of people instead of a family or caste in which a person is born into. This was also the first attempt to abolish discrimination and slavery in the history of mankind.

Next to Buddha, poet-saints attempted at reforming the caste-based system and untouchability. The poet-saints are called Bhakti movement poets. Bhakti poets like Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu Dayal, Guru Nank, Chokha Mela, Namdev etc. represented a cultural revolt. Spiritual equality, social justice and deep sympathy for the common people are major principles of the Bhakti movement. They also stressed that God is the ultimate symbol of universal love, compassion and justice. They wished that God should stand on the side of the oppressed, the weak, and the defenceless. The most dominant impact of the Bhakti movement in India was its denouncement of castes. This becomes vitally important in social terms. The rejection of the caste system that was a part of the Bhakti movement helped to liberalize Indian thought. The social implication was a transformative one in which Indians were able to envision a world without a caste system or pre-ordained social structure that denied opportunity and silenced the voice.

The arrival of western colonialism with its elements of enlightenment brought a flow of contemporary ideas to the subcontinent in the 19th century. First British colony was established in India in 1818 which accelerated the process of change and awakening. In the initial stage, it introduced many social, political and economic ideas to India on trial basis. The exposure to Christianity created more options for change and the expansion of Christianity through missionaries

familiarized the people with the Christian doctrinal thought. The colonial phase brought new knowledge, technology and effective methods of production that accelerated industrial progress.

The British colonial rule introduced penal code in 1860 which exposed the primitive form of *Varna system* that ultimately challenged the authority and supremacy of Brahmins over rest of the castes. The Raj provided the opportunity to the artisans, the untouchables and the poor people to shift from rural areas to commercial urban areas and opt the professions of their interest instead of their caste-based occupations. Establishment of universities at Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras in 1857 gradually boosted the number of educated people in the country. Various journals, periodicals catered the need of an ever-growing reading masses in the country. The western secular, democratic, liberal ideology influenced the Indian social reformers and thinkers. They soon realized that obsolete and conservative social and religious ideas and absence of education among people were the main hiccups in the development of India. They understood that inhuman and abnormal systems like untouchability, the practice of *Sati* and other superstitions were the main factor of inertia and backwardness of Indian society.

In the wake of the above enlightenment, the Dalits gave a new dimension to the understanding of Indian literature. In mid 19th century, Mahatma Phule (1827-1890) ignited the fire of revolt among the Dalits. His protests against the Brahmanical code of order gave a fillip to the Dalit Freedom Movement. He challenged the Brahmins by opening schools for Non-Brahmins and Untouchables in Pune. In 1873, he established the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' and the same year his book *Gulamgiri* was published. Phule dedicated his book *Gulamgiri* to the struggle of blacks in America. He organised the movement for Dalit and other castes (Shudras and Ati-Shudras) occupy the lower rungs of the traditional Hindu society perhaps this stage should be considered as the beginning of new Dalit literature and new Dalit literary theory for Indian literature. The first radical Dalit protest movement was led by Jyotirao Phule who fought for the freedom of India's long-suppressed humanity. He struggled to rebuild the society on the matrix of 'equality', 'justice', 'reason' etc. Phule drew a clear line between the relation of knowledge and power. In his battle against discriminatory Brahmanism, Mahatma Phule was inspired by the egalitarian philosophy of the Buddha and Kabir. Phule believed that education was the source of emancipation and empowerment, and therefore he gave maximum importance to education. Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873) was a revolutionary deconstruction of the Brahmanical culture.

After Phule's successful contribution in eradicating the sufferings of the untouchables, Dr B.R. Ambedkar's role is indomitable and unquestionable. Dr B.R. Ambedkar stood for freedom of the Dalits. He burnt a copy of *Manusmriti* at Mahad and rejected the rules of inequality. He believed in studying 'from below' and thoroughly identified the objectives of Brahmanical sacred books. He

pointed out that the Hindu sacred books gave higher priority to graded inequality among different castes. They are written to complete disarmament of the Shudras and the untouchables. Dr B.R. Ambedkar considered the Buddhist recognition of dignity and equality of human beings and converted himself into Buddhist. Dr Ambedkar recognised in Buddhism an antithesis to discriminatory Brahmanism.

Ambedkar with his follower turned to Buddhism as an alternative to the humiliation suffered by Dalits under the caste system. It is in this context that one has to understand his rejection of the term coined by Gandhi, *Harijan* (Children of God) Gandhi sought to integrate the untouchable with the traditional Hindu community. But it was impossible for them to turn to the Hindu religion for solace or look back to their Hindu past with pride. Naturally, the appellation *Harijan* appeared meaningless to them. Rather the term Dalit was defiantly assumed as a marker of identity around 1972 by the Dalit Panthers of Bombay, a group of young Dalit activists. Since then the word became synonymous with revolt, a movement for acquiring constitutional privileges, rights, political equality, cultural liberation and economic independence. Dalit Panther movement has a great influence on Dalit literature. It has been an inspiring movement which energized the Dalit writers to deconstruct the history and Dalit self. Arjun Dangle states, "Between 1972 and 2000, under the influence of the Dalit Panthers movement, writers have drawn from the Dalit communities of Gujrat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu began to write about caste and caste-related themes. As some Dalit autobiographies have been translated into English and French, Dalit literature in India got a momentum." He states that the development could be noted in various regional languages during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, Dalit movement was created as a revolutionary phenomenon with social, political, economic and cultural aims.

The contemporary Dalit literature owes a lot to the thoughts and vision of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Inspired by the philosophy of Dr Ambedkar, Nimbalkar says:

The immense potential of Dr Ambedkar and his philosophy was not restricted to himself or any one particular individual. He handed over to them the flares of his philosophy for development... His thoughts contained a graph of the progress of the people at the grassroots of the society. For this, Dr Ambedkar's life itself had become a revolution. This revolution had changed the consciousness of the Dalits... That is why Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy is the source of Dalit literature. The roots of new consciousness can be traced in the thoughts of Buddha (Nimbalkar).

Baburao Bagul also comments that Dr Ambedkar is the inspiration behind the Dalit movement in India. He states:

With these utterances, I recalled the life of Dr Babasaheb who was highly qualified. But his pen on learning his caste threw away his files and saved his religion from being defiled by the breeze blowing across him... Dr Babasaheb was the brain behind Mahad Liberation Movement... It was giving birth to a great war and to Buddha, and to a great movement and thus Babasaheb created history... Babasaheb had changed his religion since the thirteenth century became the religion of thousands of his followers... (Nimbalkar 43-44)

Another critic G.B. Sardar analysis the relevance of the thought of Ambedkar and its influence on the emerging Dalit writers in his words:

Dr Ambedkar's movement revitalized Dalit community and turned it towards self-respect. Forgetting their suffering, they got the inspiration to struggle for their natural rights from this movement... The new poets amongst them declared through each and every word a resolve by saying 'today we see in each and every hut a full sun'. 'They said no to the dark death like life and marched forward through their writing towards bright life (Nimbalkar 45).

Arjun Dangle states, "Studying Dalit literature and its role from only a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it. It must be assessed in the sociological framework (237)." Dangle further states, "While both Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Phule revolted against the unjust class structure and while it is true their teaching and ideas are inspiring even today a historical and objective examination of the situation reveals that it was Dr Ambedkar who was the enabling factor in Dalit literature because of his ideas outlook towards life and his struggle to achieve what he felt just (237-38)."

Arjun Dangle in his polemical book, *Poisoned Bread* (1992), said, "Dr Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits. The literary manifestation of the social awareness is Dalit literature."

Before the rise of Ambedkar movement in India, there was a social mobilization in the name of 'Adi-movement'. They are basically Non-Brahman in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, Adi-Dharma movement in Punjab, Adi-Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh and Hyderabad, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra and Adi-Karnataka movements in South India succeeded in mobilizing the masses.

By 1960s, some Dalit educated youth who had been strongly influenced by Dr Ambedkar came forward to build an organisation, with an aim of fighting against social problems and the caste system. They named it 'Dalit Panther Movement' and it was initiated on 9th July 1972 by two writers Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale. Self-awareness was the main force behind this Dalit Panther movement which was inspired by the Black Panthers of America. The Dalit Panthers led a huge

movement to rename Marathwada University after Ambedkar. Dalit Panthers were highly inspired by America's Black Panthers and remained a revolutionary and militant organisation of Indian Dalits.

Dalit writers point out that the entire history of oppression and exploitation has not been recorded which is a literal holocaust. Under the influence of Dr Ambedkar and in the light of Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra, Dalit writers initiated the issue of self-respect in their writings. Dalit literature played an important role in establishing social consciousness among its masses. Gradually, the awareness spread across India, almost in every region, Dalit writers through their poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies started questioning the caste hierarchy and political supremacy. Implicitly and explicitly, Dr B.R. Ambedkar's influence on the emerging Dalit writers is very keen and particular. Now Dalit writers aimed at breaking the 'culture of silence' imposed on them. They started telling their stories in their own languages and idioms. Now, Dalit is an alternative and collective word for 'Shudras' or 'Untouchables' or 'Harijans' and a symbol of environment for change, confrontation or revolution.

Through their writings, the Dalit writers made a fervent appeal for a complete overhaul of society as Dangle said, 'Even the sun needs to be changed'. Meena Kandasamy states "Like Black Literature, Dalit writing was characterized by a new level of pride, militancy, sophisticated creativity and above all sought to use writing as a weapon (web)."

Literature is a significant vehicle for any revolution. In 1789, Rousseau and Voltaire contributed immensely through their literature for the French Revolution; the Russian Revolution (1917) is indebted to the writings of Marx, Lenin, Tolstoy, Gorky, Dostoevsky etc. In a similar vein, Dr Ambedkar's writings were a great inspiration for motivating the desire for revolution among the Dalits. The Dalit Panther Movement and Dalit literature are hence, interrelated. The Dalit writers found the contemporary untrue towards the social reality pertaining to the Dalits. They wanted a literature that represents their sufferings, a true exhibition of the inhuman conditions of the downtrodden people. Dalit literature gives a vivid account of their plight and calls for total change.

What is all the more disturbing is that such social ostracism was sought to be justified in terms of presumed sins committed in the previous birth. The doctrine of rebirth in the Hindu religion does not only sanction 'untouchability' but even prescribes and justifies it under the idea of *Karma*. The scriptural sanction and justification provided by the Hindu law-givers led Dalits to accept their fate without demur resulting in the state of mental servility. Untouchability is not only physical; it has a mental impact destroying in the victim any sense of self-respect. Dr Pashupati Prasad Mahato, an eminent anthropologist and vice-president of the Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, states, "The consequences of dispossession led them to poverty, exploitation, oppression and dehumanisation culminating into the cultural silence that debilitates and destroys not only personality but also cultural

excellence and creative genius... The Mulvasi-Dalit clusters of ethnic groups lost their cultural strength and were forced to think and act according to the idioms and symbols of dominant nationalities in the Indian situation. This process we term as cultural silence (Biswas 37-38)."

This process of cultural 'Dalitisation' is fraught with insidious 'upper-caste' intention of keeping them in the state of perpetual servility – both physical and mental. The Dalit literary movement has emerged as a reaction against this process with the commitment to defy all such attempts.

The kind of deprivation and degradation suffered by the Dalits has affinities with those experienced by Black slaves in Europe and America. Yet in a way, the humiliation of the Dalit is unique in the sense that his exclusion is not merely economic but scriptural. The white races tried to justify their behaviour towards the Blacks on some pseudo-scientific grounds of their own superiority but they did not invoke the scriptures in support of their claim; the caste Hindus attempted to explain it on the basis of scriptural sanction.

The bases of exclusion of the Dalits from the mainstream society lie in the Hindu/Brahmanical ideology. Casteism is a permanently organised force and an institutionalised inequality as Antonio Gramsci and Berreman described oppression in terms of hegemony. Understanding Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', "Hegemony is power achieved through a combination of coercion and consent." Playing upon Machiavelli's suggestion that power can be achieved through both force and fraud, Gramsci argued, "The ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who 'willingly' submit to being ruled. Ideology is crucial in creating consent; it is the medium through which certain ideas are transmitted and, more important, held to be true. Hegemony is achieved not only by direct manipulation or indoctrination but by playing upon the common sense of people." Gramsci suggests how ideologies animate social relation, 'organize human masses', and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc (Loomba 31).

According to Althusser, this kind of dominance is an ideology through which the dominant class is able to reproduce its class domination. Brahmans use this ideology of caste as a crucial instrument to de-humanise, divide and dominate the Dalits in India.

The dominance of caste-based oppression resulted in resistance and rebellion. Foucault observes that dominance and resistance often go hand in hand. But the agents of history, that include historiography, art and literature, record the mainstream aspects of life. The history of resistance and rebellion of the Dalits did not form part of the historiography, art and literature. The aesthetic forums, which were the domains of the Brahmans, either silenced or erased the voices of Dalit protest and

resistance. Yet there have been attempts to bring the Dalits into the mainstream giving voice to their silenced and erased aspects of life. There have been different stages of Dalit protest.

Dalit literature signifies a new dimension of the concept of Marginal literature as used in the general literary sense. This literature is typically Indian not only in its roots but also in its purpose and goal. It is addressed to the entire Indian literary tradition and its fulfilment lies in the total transformation of this tradition. Dalit literature is a stream of what is known as Marginal literature in general. This literature has transformed the Indian literary tradition. Dalit literature is the postcolonial movement aims at giving voice to the creative urges of the masses of numerous castes, communities, tribes oppressed for centuries to voiceless existence.

Protest and rejection is not only the aim of Dalit literature but it also reconstructs the past. Dalit consciousness has enabled intellectual to investigate the history and culture of India from Dalit point of view. This marginal approach to history has initiated a process for the rediscovery of India. Like Black literature, a new level of pride, attitude, militancy could be seen in Dalit writings. Dalit writers have used writing as a weapon. This literature is drawing a new image of Bharat through a new critical lens.

Notes

1. **Sati** was the practice among some Hindu communities by which a recently widowed woman either voluntarily or by use of force or coercion commits suicide as a result of her husband's death. The best-known form of sati is when a woman burns to death on her husband's funeral pyre.
2. **Karma** is a concept in Hinduism which explains causality through a system where beneficial effects are derived from past beneficial actions and harmful effects from past harmful actions, creating a system of actions and reactions throughout a soul's (Atman's) reincarnated lives forming a cycle of rebirth

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