

Socio-cultural reality of Dalits in R K Narayan's Novels

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ABSTRACT

In this paper Narayan's two novels are considered for the study, "*Waiting for the Mahatma*" and "*The Financial Expert*". "*Waiting for the Mahatma*" was first published in 1955. It is a love story of Sriram and Bharti in five parts. With the main story of Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in Malgudi to communicate his message to the people of Malgudi and love story of Sriram and bharti, Narayan has also depicted Dalits of Malgudi. He has created real picture of Dalits of that era. Since centuries to remove dead and dirt this work is imposed on Dalits. Because of economic dependency and for their survival, they had / have to do this disgusting work. Even today in most part of our country this job is reserved for them. Hindu scripture have inculcated in Hindu minds that such job is unclean so, keep it reserved for (Shudras) Dalits, though at present very few upper-caste people also do this cleaning job. But in the Western World concept of cleaning is different. What Narayan has presented is the real picture of Dalits' socio-cultural life of that era. This is the reality of Dalit kids even today. Gandhiji lovingly welcomes the child and asks about his family.

Key Words: *Gandhiji, Dalits, social background, untouchability, upper-caste, condition*

R. K. Narayan is one of the celebrated Indian-English writers who has mainly focused on social and cultural life of Indians particularly of Hindus, in a very realistic way. In his novels he has presented the people of different castes, including Dalits. In Indian society since time immemorial one section of it was/is neglected as Untouchables whose shadow even defiled (s) the religious fundamentalists. This section was identified by various terms in different ear of Indian social and cultural history. During the pre-independent time this oppressed humanity was known as Untouchables. Writers of pre-independence era when they mention this section of society they used the term Untouchables for them.

But after 1932 Mahatma Gandhi gave the new term to them 'Harijan'. On the other hand Dr . Ambedkar and his followers preferred the term 'Dalit' instead of ' Harijan'. But now Dalit is widely used for the people who became /become victims of untouchability. In this paper term Dalit is used instead of Untouchables.

R. K. Narayan has not mainly highlighted Dalits as Mulk Raj Anand has done. Anand has given fully-fledged novel on Valmiki, the sub-caste of Dalits. But Narayan has presented Dalits' socio-cultural reality in a scattered way with the main theme in his works. Anand has presented Dalits of pre-independent North India while Narayan has presented oppressed humanity of South India. But their suffering was identical.

To bring Dalits to the mainstream Indian literatures and the center of literary world of India, for that, in early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi remained the source of inspiration for the upper-caste mainstream writers. As a matter of fact, in the first half of the 20th century Gandhi had directly or indirectly influenced most of Indian writing, including regional literatures too. Gandhi's humanitarian thought and actions were chiefly reflected in the lectures of that era. Particularly for Dalits issue Dr. Ambedkar had already started the struggle

for Dalit's human rights from 1920. His movement was highly rational and straight forward. But the main stream writers had not noticed what Dr. Ambedkar had spoken and done for the Dalits. But the British government had seriously considered Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts and his mission. As a result on 17th August 1932, the Communal Award was announced to protect Dalits' safeguards in the legislature. As a protest against the Communal Award and to uplift Dalits by accepting them on humanitarian ground, Gandhiji had launched the nationwide campaign. R. K. Narayan in his 'Malgudi World' has presented the issue skillfully and aesthetically.

In this paper Narayan's two novels are considered for the study, "*Waiting for the Mahatma*" and "*The Financial Expert*". "*Waiting for the Mahatma*" was first published in 1955. It is a love story of Sriram and Bharti in five parts. Narayan has not clearly mentioned Bharati's family and social background but he has mentioned it thus through the dialogues taking place between Bharati and Sriram;

"She said; "The name was given by Bapuji himself."

"Oh, how grand! he cried.

"She added, "You know my fattier died during the 1920 movement. Just I was born. When he learnt of it Bapuji who had come down South, made himself my grandfather and named me Bharati....After my mother's death, I was practically adopted by the local Sevak Sangh, and I have not known any other home since." (p.38)

Gandhiji's Sevak Sangh aimed to uplift Harijan by accepting them. In his Ashram Dalits were also included for better social model. About Bharati, the author has mentioned this much that she is the daughter of India. But indirectly it communicates that she is from lower caste. Right from her childhood she learns the lesson from Gandhian thoughts and practice. And she remains the Gandhian worker up to the end of the novel, while belongs to the upper-caste who is fascinated her towards her beauty and service to gandhian mission.

With the main story of Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in Malgudi to communicate his message to the people of Malgudi and love story of Sriram and bharati, Narayan has also depicted Dalits of Malgudi. He has created real picture of Dalits of that era.

Narayan has depicted Sriram's family and social background; He is from the orthodox Hindu family. Without parents the young man of twenty lives with his Granny. His Granny is very rigid and orthodox. She is not ready to accept any change. She evaluates everything from orthodox Hindu perspectives. When Sriram brings canvas chair in the home as a gift for Granny she reacts thus; "What, for me! It's no use for me. This is some kind of leather, probably cowhide, and I cannot pollute myself by sitting on it."(p.12) this typical incident indicates she has profound faith in Hindu orthodoxy. The orthodox upper-castes of that era strongly believed that if dead animals' leather would touch to them, then they would be polluted! Physically and mentally! Because that was once touched by Dalits. Dead and Dalits be not touched.

Narayan depicts Dalits' situation in a very real way. Untouchability was practiced. Dalits, though they clean the dirt of upper-castes were not treated humanely. Sriram's Granny Dalits thus;

"She would not let the scavenger approach nearer than ten yards, and habitually adopted a bullying tone while addressing him Sriram also took pleasure in joining the scavenger's work, although he never paid the slightest attention to their comment."(p.19)

The incident indicates the persecutory mentality of upper-castes at that time Dalits' had no any options.

Narayan has appropriately presented the Dalits of Malgudi their colony which was situated on the bank of rivar Saryu is presented thus.

it was probably the worst area in the town, and an exaggeration even to call them huts; they were just hovels, put together with rugs, tin-sheets, and shreds of coconut matting, all crowded in anyhow, with scratchy fowls cackling about and children growing in the street dust. The municipal services were neither extended here nor missed, although the people living in the hovels were employed by the municipality for scavenging work in the town.....These men spent less than a tenth of their income in food or clothing, always depending upon mendicancy in their off hours for survival. Deep into the night their voices could be heard clamouring for alms, in all the semi-dark streets of Malgudi. Troublesome children were silenced at the sound of their approach. Their possessions were very few; if caw or a calf died in the city they were called in to carry off the carcass and then the colony at the river's edge brightened up, for they held a feast on the flesh of dead animal and made money out of its hide."(p.23-24)

This was the untouched colony of the dalit filthy and disgusting. Dalits of that time were not provided any civilized facility. They were used as tool to remove unwanted things from the upper-caste society. But they were not provided the basic requirements by the municipality. Even today in 21st century, we still see most of Dalit ghettos are in the similar position, everywhere in India. Whatever Narayan has presented here is the unpleasant reality of Indian society. Nothing is exaggerating.

Narayan has presented Dallis as the beef-eaters. Cow and calf the holy animals according to the Hindu scriptures. Cow is considered as holy mother but bull has no more important place in the scriptures except in *Shivaism*. Then how the beef-eaters are accepted as human beings by the orthodox ? As a matter of fact beef-eating/ meat-eating practice is not new to our society. Earlier hindus though they were known as Aryans, were taking beef and meat of other animals as their food. Dr. Ambedkar remarked how that non-vegetarianism turned into vegetarianism; "The beef eaters Hinduism absorbed the non-violence theory of Buddhism and became religion of vegetarianism." (Dr. Ambedkar: What Congress and religion Gandhi have done to Untouchables: 195)

Narayan has depicted Dalits as meat-eaters, but what the else they could get and eat? For survival something must be eaten which is available. The society did not provide hygienic food because of untouchability. Helplessness and quest for survival forced them to eat dead animals' meat. Thus for meat-eating

they were not solely to be blamed. Later on Dr. Ambedkar and Gandhiji both had opposed meat-eating practice of dead animals. This sort of meat-eater remained disgusting people in the eyes of orthodox Hindus.

Since centuries to remove dead and dirt this work is imposed on Dalits. Because of economic dependency and for their survival, they had / have to do this disgusting work. Even today in most part of our country this job is reserved for them. Hindu scripture have inculcated in Hindu minds that such job is unclean so, keep it reserved for (Shudras) Dalits, though at present very few upper-caste people also do this cleaning job. But in the Western World concept of cleaning is different. What Narayan has presented is the real picture of Dalits' socio-cultural life of that era.

In the sort of Dalits colony Gandhiji preferred to live with the dalits in their huts as a member of their family. It was revolutionary adventure of Gandhiji. Many Gandhian who worked in Harijan Sevak Sang to accept dalits as human beings were badly treated by the orthodox. But Gandhiji strongly believed to change orthodox Hindus rigid attitudes towards neglected people. He introduced himself as dailt. He also told the orthodox to repent on their inhuman deeds towards dalits. He has created army of fighters who fought against untouchability. Tolerance was their weapon and social change was their goal. They were educated upper-caste people. Smt.Saralaben Sarabhai, the chairperson of *Untouchability Removal Organization* had said thus under Gandhian influence.

"All the creative actions, to stand by the Dalits, we have to take. There should not be separate wells, ponds, schools, hospitals and temples for them, even the houses where they live, never be segregated. It is essential to form the master plan to promote their education and the udhyogs which improve their financial condition." (Hanjan Samasya: Mahatma Gandhi: 76)

As a part of *Sarvodaya Mission* Gandhiji had insisted on *Gruh Udhyogs* (Home Industry). Through *Gruh Udhyogs* he wished to solve Dalits' financial dependency. By *Sarvodaya* Gandhiji wished to change Hindus' hearts towards Dalits and longed to create homogenous society. But his wish did not materialized because simultaneously he favoured Varnashrama,

Narayan has skillfully and aesthetically interwoven Gandhian thoughts in this novel. Here Gandhiji addresses the people of Malgudi in his unique style. People greet him with raising hands and welcome him by clapping. Gandhiji addresses them; "I want to see unity in it." (Among the people of all castes)(p. 16)

In the public meeting of Malgudi, Gandhiji spoke on untouchability and caste, (p. 19) Narayan has described that everybody gathered there had listened him silently. He also on Khaddar and inspired the people to use it. Khaddar-product is the part of Sarvodaya. Weavers and weaving profession, considered inferior job and was mainly done by Dalits. Gandhiji wished to uplift Dalits and their professions too. He wanted to convince the people no person or profession is inferior.

In Malgudi Gandhiji's accommodation was arranged in Neel Bagh, the house of Municipal chairman Mr. Natesh. But Gandhiji refused to stay in the luxurious house of the upper-caste and preferred the small hut of Dalits. Narayan has given nice picture of Gandhiji's short stay at Neel Bagh. Grand welcome was arranged

people were shouting 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai'. (p.26) Local people assumed that Gandhiji would stay in the luxurious house like Birla House - Delhi and Calcutta. But in this novel Gandhiji preferred to stay with Dalits. His Harijan uplift movement was bitterly criticized on political ground. But in this novel Narayan has presented it thus;

"The picture of him as a social reformer was left intact and even enlarged; anyone who read the address would conclude that politics were the last thing that Mahatma ji was interested in."(p.26)

For social welfare of Dalits Gandhiji had tried systematically to change social attitudes towards Dalits. Narayan depicts here that Gandhiji said if the people of Malgudi wished to listen him, they should come to the bank of river Saryu where the Dalits were living.

At Neel Bagh, Narayan has portrayed very touching incident. A Dalit boy joined the procession and reached at Neel Bagh where Gandhiji was warmly invited. Here Gandhiji has seen the poor boy and he has called the boy. "AV in Hindi", when it made no impression on the child, he said in little Tamil he had picked up for this part of the country, '*Inge Va*'. (p. 30) when Gandhij greeted the boy, the host was not happy because the child was the child of sweeper. Narayan pictures tragic reality of the Dalit child;

"a small dark fellow with a protruding belly and wearing nothing over his body except a cast-off knitted vest, adult size, full of holes, which reached down to his ankles."(p.31)

This is the reality of Dalit kids even today. Gandhiji lovingly welcomes the child and asks about his family. The boy replies; "My father sweeps the streets."(p. 31) When the talk was taking place between Gandhiji and the child, the host, the chairman thought; "all world's gutters are on this boy, and is going to leave a permanent stain on that Kashmir counterpane."(p.31) Chairman's view was the general view of upper-caste people for Dalits. But Gandhian message made effect on his heart, so he had not opposed the child's entry. Later on Gandhiji has invited the chairman to the Dalits' colony. Narayan has nicely presented the picture of the Dalit child and Gandhiji; "Mahatma ji gave his fore finger to the young boy to clutch and allowed himself to be led down the verandah steps." (p.33) This picture is the famous one we find in most of Gandhian institutes. Then Gandhiji and the boy both travelled to the Dalit colony by the motor-car.

The unexpected arrival of Gandhiji has brought tremendous change in the Dalit colony. Earlier it was the untouched neglected area but later on immediately turned thus;

"All the stench mysteriously vanished; all the garbage and offal that lay about, and flesh and hide put out to sun-dry on the roofs, disappeared. All that night municipal and other employees kept working, with the aid of petrol lamps: light was such a rarity that the children kept dancing all night around the lamp. Gandhiji noticed the hectic activity, but out of sense of charity refrained from

commenting on it. Only when it was over did he say, 'Now one can believe that the true cleaners of city live here.' (p.33-34)

It is not only the story of pre-independent India of the Dalits' colony. Even today in the early 21st century, in even urban area, Dalits are living in filthy ghettos without any facility of civilized society.

Gandhiji's dalits' temple entry issue is criticized by both dalits and non-dalits. Dalits's misery is religiously supported. Dalits were not allowed to enter the temples. Narayan has skillfully included the point in this novel. When Sriram joins the camp and this message is conveyed to his Granny, she react thus: "The Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples", (p.41) dalits' temple entry opposed by many. Here granny is the only example. Gandhiji wished this is also a means to accept dalits in the mainstream of Hindu society. But dalits's temple entry was not the solution of dalits misery as Dr. Ambedkar remarked. Narayan presents that Gandhiji's stay in south and he had collected the fund for Harijan Sevak Sangh. (p. 72)

At the end of the novel Bharati and Sriram's marriage is arranged. But Gandhiji said perhaps he could not attend the ceremony, Narayan has presented the fact of Gandhiji's killing. Thus not directly the Dalit issue is presented but as a sub-theme it is nicely put before the readers.

In Narayan's other novel *'The Financial Expert'* Dalits are also presented. Originally it is the story of Margayya, the man from upper-caste, how he becomes the millionaire and again becomes the ordinary person.

In this novel Narayan has presented Dalits differently. They are presented in the first part when Margayya's son Balu, was a child. In the fourth part Narayan depicts Halu's wedding and the third year of the war. (p.182) It means Narayan depicts the time of early 20th century.

The novelist has not mentioned Dalits as important beings. But they are there. Narayan has mentioned a group of people who collect money and bury the orphan dead-body. During that time and even today to carry unidentified dead-body and to bury it in the lap of mother earth this work was/ is given to the Dalits. Narayan has presented that a few of them were also doing manual job including scavenging.

The Dalits are differently presented here. Their way of living life is worst;

"A group of people seized upon an unclaimed dead body, undertook to give it a burial and collected a lot of money for it..... they celebrated it as a festive occasion.....They left their occupations, seized the body, carried it to a public place, put it down on the pavement, placed a few flowers on it, bought a few mud trays from the potter, and assailed the passerby. They collect enough money at the end of the day to give gorgeous funeral to the body. They even haggled with the grave-digger and were left with so much money at the end of it all that they drank and made merry

for three or four days and gave up temporarily their normal jobs, such as scavenging, load-carrying and stone-quarrying." (p.28)

With the first reading it seems the Dalits were uncivilized, uncultured people. They make money with the help of even dead body of human beings! But when we know reality of that time we do not criticize Dalits. The civilized way of living life was not taught to them at all. Because of untouchability and social hatred they could not learn the art of civilized and cultured way of living life. Their basic human requirements were not considered, even they were not considered as human beings. Then how can the civilized manners be expected from them?

Dr. Ambedkar has appropriately remarked on Dalits' this sort of situation;

"The Untouchables has no entry in the higher arts of civilization and no way open to a life of culture. He must only sweep. He must do nothing else. Untouchability carries no security as to livelihood. None from Hindus is responsible for the feeding, housing and clothing of the untouchables. The health of Untouchable is the care of Nobody. Indeed, the death of an untouchable is regarded as a good riddance." (Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches- Vol: 5:p.17)

In this sort of society what good things we can hope Dalits ? Hindu social structure has created more misery for Dalits. Since the centuries they were / are taught that they had to do unclean job. Quest for survival forced them to do all.

To work in gutters is/was the job of scavengers. Upper caste, people cannot do it. Religion bans it. Sophisticated civilized thought prevents a person! If any upper-caste would do it publicly he was/is prevented! Narayan depicts the incident in this novel. Margayya's mischievous son Balu has flung the account book in the gutter. The book was very precious one for Margayya. He lost his temper and looked with anger, (p.41) When gathered people saved the boy and Margavya left alone, he vaguely poked into gutter and ran the, stick from end to end. (p.4 l) When he was doing his work at that time schoolteacher came and advised thus; "Call a scavengere and ask him to look for it. He'll have the proper thing with him for poking here, Don't try to do everything yourself." (p.43) Narayan has appropriately presented social disgust on the Dalits and their unclean job.

In Narayan's Malgudi world the Dalits are not only the imaginative creatures. Reality is artistically presented. At the end, of 20th century, Dalits' condition in South India was like this;

Within the couple of miles of the

university of Mysore there are Dalit villages still without running water, gutter, sewers and the like; the authority helps but was repeatedly broken by caste members they thought that Untouchables did not deserve a civic service,"(Shankar D.N,141)

It is obvious what Narayan has presented is not merely the imagination at all. *In waiting for the Mahatma* Dalits are presented as pitiable caste with their helpless condition. In *The Financial Expert* they are presented as uncultured community. Through Gandhian massage Narayan wants to change the attitudes orthodox Hindus. He tries to convey the message to accept Dalits on humanitarian ground mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar's mean to uplift Dalits were different but goal was same.

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