



SHIFTING VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD: REPRESENTATION OF CASTE SYSTEM IN JIM CORBETT'S CHAMARI AND BANDHUMADHAV'S THE POISONED BREAD

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Human beings in order to sustain their collective existence created values after the foundation of the society. Values are the beliefs that determine the right, wrong and what is important in life” (“Value”). Human motives, purposes, thinking, judgments and their thoughts, activities and behaviours are strongly influenced by the values. For its progressive and dynamic nature, society adjusts itself with the values when it passes through the different evolutionary stages. So, the acquired values, if it is prolific for society in its advancement through time, are rightly called positive values. For example, equality, freedom, self-confidence, self-respect, co-operation, respect for others, right conduct, kindness, friendship, love, compassion, sympathy, responsibility, truth, rationality in judgment and the pursuit of knowledge are positive values. The core positive values set the context upon which the process of decision-making in life is carried out. We live our lives based on our core positive values; these are the foundation of our lives from where we make our decisions. The opposite connotations of these positive values are rightly regarded as negative or counter values. The reason behind the growth of these counter values may be ignorance of a society about their cultural heritage or the deliberate approach of a group for their own sake in imposing these values over others in order to establish their supremacy.

Positive values have left a far-reaching effect in our pluralistic and multicultural Indian society enriching cultural heritage. It is important to have an historical understanding of how these productive values of ancient India have been gradually reduced into fatalistic ones in the modern time oppressing the lowest section of the society whom are called the Untouchables or *Dalits*¹. In ancient India the Aryans completely subordinated the Dravidians and aborigines and created two classes or *Varnas* – Aryans and non-Aryans in Indian society. Non-Aryans or the natives, aborigines and the Dravidians were categorized as *dasyus* or criminal tribes. In order to avoid contact with this group of people, the Aryans formed a new occupational and functional division of the society. This is evident in the X chapter of *Rigveda* called as “Purusha Sukta”:

brāhmaṇo asya mukham āsīt bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ

ūrū tad asya yad vaishyaḥ pradbhyām shūdro ajāyata (Mantra: 10.90.12) (Rao 71)

The Mantra:10.90.12 expounds that the four Varnas were created from the body of 'Purusa' (the primeval man) whose four organs gave birth of four classes – Brahmanas (priests) from his mouth, Kshatriyas (warriors) from his shoulders, Vaishyas (merchants) from his thighs and Shudras (labourers) from his feet. Various organs suggested various occupations made by these organs and had no intention to humiliate any class. The Shudras, now as Dalits, had no other options but to lead their life doing manual scavenging and sweeping and this disparaging system is still intact in modern society. Dalits are still recognized as such an inferior and repulsive group that if any upper caste accidentally touches them by mistake, they have to perform religious ablutions to protect themselves from being polluted. Again, Chapter V in *Rig Veda* mentions, “*Ajayaestasa ete sam bhrataro bavridhuh saubhagaya*” (V: 60:5) (qtd. in Sharma 244) that means by birth there is no difference among men. They are all equal and they should work together for their welfare. Thus, it is evident that, in the early stages of Hindu society, there was a division on the basis of class or Varna which gave precedence to profession over birth. Later, the people belonging to these three Varnas from the highest order in order to secure their livelihoods and their dominance changed the policy. The professions became hereditary. Then the class system was transformed into caste² system. In the 5th century B. C. caste system in Hindu society was approved through the religious texts written by Brahmins who announced what was going on in the society made by God. Shudras were obliged by the Kshatriyas to abide by all the social, economic and religious

slavery. They had no land for cultivation and were strictly prohibited to follow any profession. The untouchables who are actually the 'broken men' were forced to live at the outskirts of the village and almost treated like a beast (Ambedkar, 271-77). They were devoid of any principles of humanity and were obliged to lead a life of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice and atrocities which are the representatives of negative values. Religion and the state have successfully exerted together to enslave the Shudras into mental, cultural and social slavery and later to untouchability (Dangle xx). Buddhism opposed not only the unequal caste system, but also the strict moral rigidity of Hinduism and advised adherence to the eight practices and that proves Buddhism to be a liberating religion for the Shudras. Subsequently, many local sects and religions in medieval India challenged the Brahmanical orthodoxy. The Bhakti movement was one of them which gave utmost importance to equality, freedom, communal harmony and tolerance.

With the establishment of the British Government who brought knowledge, technology and western education in India, there was a strong upheaval in the society. The colonial administrators began to treat the untouchables as human beings and gave them an opportunity to work along with other castes. In the nineteenth century the reformist movement - the Brahmo Samaj movement led by Raja Rammohun Roy, the Hindu spiritual movement of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda and the Arya Samaj of Dayananda Saraswati - sought to reform the unequal Indian social order. Being aware of the untouchability and the plights of Shudras, Mahatma Gandhi, in spite of his fallacious endeavour, at least tried to elevate their social status by addressing them as the children of God or Harijans. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerged as a truly inspiring figure for the Dalits and he always devoted himself to eradicating the evil caste system in Indian society. They also felt his revolutionary spirit when he advised them to be educated, agitated and organized.

Literature is closely connected with life, its hopes and frustrations. The corrosion of values in relation to the ways Dalits are treated in Indian society is invariably presented through the corpus of Indian writing in English literature. Bidulata Chowdhury opines, "The enigma of the freedom movement, the confrontation of the East-West, growing awareness of the untouchables, backward classes and above all, the miracle of Mahatma Gandhi, great purveyor of all this changes, inspired the writers to be a part of the process by presenting exact picture of the present form." (Chowdhury 28) Mulk Raj Anand came to the fore in between

1930s and 1940s. His first novel *Untouchable* (1935) dealt with the life of Bakha, a young sweeper of an untouchable community, who had to undergo a lot of humiliating experiences to make an effort to release from the degradation of his life. Girish Karnad's play, *Taledanda* (1990) highlights the issue of the equality of sexes and the condemnation of the caste system. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) deals with the brutality against the Dalits through the representation of a Dalit character, Velutha.

This paper seeks to do a comparative study of two short stories of modern Indian English literature – Jim Corbett's "Chamari" (1952) and Bandhumadhav's "The Poisoned Bread" (1992) as translated by Ramesh Dnyate by critically examining the contested issues of possessing positive values or acquired negative ones in a caste-ridden society. The humanistic approach made by the British Government to elevate the underprivileged section of the society is discerned in Jim Corbett's writings which deal with the simple life of poor and the lowest section of the society. Corbett's love for the poor and the lowest section of the society, the Untouchables in pre-independent India – and his efforts to emancipate them from the bondage of caste-based societal rigidity is amply evident in the short story "Chamari" taken from *My India*. The setting of this story is at Mokameh Ghat which was situated 90 k. m. away from Patna in Bihar. The story begins with: "Chamari, as his name implies, belonged to the lowest strata of India's sixty million Untouchables" (168). Chamari, as Corbett insinuates, is not a character but the representative of a sect of the society that is *Chamar* or *Charmakar* or cobbler. The society's hierarchical system forced this section of society to adopt an identity which represents their caste. The so-called upper caste Hindus had no respect for them. Corbett points out that Chamari's appearance literally reflects years of exploitation due to caste system. The reason behind this suffering is not only poverty but also the age-old exploitation of unjust caste system in Indian society as this system deprived them to have an access to the world of the mainstream professions. Due to Chamari's poor physical condition and his inability to execute shed work, the narrator shows his generosity by employing him and his wife in a trans-shipping coal mine. This opportunity was never bestowed upon him by the so-called upper castes in Hindu society who were always busy promoting religion, political power and to exploit them for their own benefit. The narrator again promoted Chamari as a headman of a coal gang of over "two hundred men and women" (169). Chamari, for the first time in his life, realized the taste of equality in a hierarchical society and acquired self-respect for himself as the narrator summarizes:

A humble man who one short hour earlier had labored under all the disqualifications of his lowly birth walked out my office with a book tucked under his arm, a pencil behind his ear and for the first time in his life, his head in the air. (169)

But Chamari's self-confidence never leads him to show disrespect against the "Brahmins, Chattris, and Thakurs" (169). Corbett's compassion for Chamari is also evident when the author increases his salary from fifteen rupees to forty rupees per month, as a person in India is primarily valued by his earnings as well as by how he uses his money (171). Values like compassion, caring, friendship and respect for others are inherent qualities of Chamari's character as these lines substantiate it:

All of his own lowly caste who passed his door were welcome to share his food, and those whose caste prohibited them from eating the food cooked by his wife were provided with material to enable them to prepare their own food. (171)

Chamari's sympathetic attitude is evident when he with the narrator nursed two women and a man stricken by cholera at Mokameh Ghat. Affected by cholera, Chamari told Corbett when he was at his deathbed, "Maharaj, Parameswar is calling me, and I must go" (175). After hearing these words, a Brahmin priest of the great Vishnu Temple at Kashi "approached the foot of the bed and made obeisance to the dead Untouchable" (176). Chamari fulfills the criteria of being elevated to the status of Brahmana:

Janmanā jāyate sūdraḥ saṃskārad bhaved dvijaḥ (*The Skanda-Purāna: Part XVIII*, 1027)

This *shloka*³ means that a man is a Shudra by birth and he becomes a Brahmana through consecration (*The Skanda-Purāna: Part XVIII*, 1030). It is again reiterated in *Manusmriti*: "Sudra becomes Brahmin, Brahmin becomes Sudra" (ch.10:65) (qtd. in Sharma 245). This transition is what an ideal society demands. The treatment of a human being does not depend upon his birth or caste but upon his *Karmas* or actions and his *Gunas* or qualities. Despite of his friendless condition and seemingly incompetent in the casteist society, Chamari, according to Corbett, elevated his status and was loved and respected by all (176). So, it is right to remark that, following the three *Gunas* of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Chamari has acquired the *Guna* of *Sattva* i.e.,

purity which Brahmins claim to possess. His actions forced Corbett and others to follow him, as the narrator says:

Chamari was heathen, according to our Christian belief, and the lowest of India's Untouchables, but if I am privileged to go where he has gone, I shall be content. (176)

After the Indian Independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution abolishes the practice of untouchability and it is mentioned in Article 17. Despite all these legislative measures, constitutional provisions and facilities of reservations, Dalits are still victims of discrimination, atrocities and harassment in many ways. So, the democratic ideals like justice, equality and liberty turn ineffective and remain as nothing but printed letters on pages. Inequality, injustice, hatred, insult, disrespect, unkindness, slavery and hostility are some of the pessimistic values that bleed a social life dry and are delineated sincerely in Bandhumadhav's "The Poisoned Bread". This story deals with the boundless misery of the Mahar⁴ community in Maharashtra between the 1960s and 1970s, represented by the two characters – Yetala and his grandson, Mhadeva.

The story begins with the insinuation of social inequality pre-ordained by the age-old tradition in the society where the untouchables had no choice but to act as scavengers or manual laborers to the upper caste lords. In the morning Yetala and Mhadeva went for a job "winnowing and treading out the corn at the threshing floor" (167) and ultimately found a job from Babu Patil, an upper caste landlord. Yetala saluted him like "a maharaja" (167) with *johar*, one kind of salutation to an upper caste. But in exchange of his salutation, Babu Patil insulted and accused Yetala for being present so early in the morning because the presence of a Mahar in the upper caste house in the morning, according to the traditional belief which Patil also supported, would bring misfortune to their family (167). This is one of the traditional instances of the way untouchables are treated by the upper caste. But Yetala did not show any signs of resentment after hearing such insulting remarks, instead calling himself as his beggar and expressing his respect and humility towards him (168). Babu Patil is again sarcastic towards him by mentioning the new identity of the untouchables as *Harijans* and their demand of equality. He also made a disparaging comment: "... the rain-god got enraged because you – the Mahars and Mangs – have profaned religion, and abandoning caste, have defiled Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur" (168). Such primeval ill-treatment makes Yetala submissive and naturalizes these tortures and humiliation but

his city-bred and educated grandson, Mhadeva cannot tolerate such malign comments and asks Patil about the validation of such an inhuman religion which cannot treat all human beings equally. He again condemns the hostility of God who is believed to be polluted by the Mangs and Mahars even though He created them (168). Babu Patil also remarked insultingly that despite his higher education Mhadeva would remain as a Mahar and would never be a Brahmin (169). Babu Patil supports the divine creation of the society's hierarchical system and advocates: "Everyone must abide by this scheme and act accordingly ... A chappal is never worshiped in place of God" (169). *Chappal* or foot-wear suggests the maker of chappal, *chamar* or cobbler who, according to Babu Patil, will never be able to attain respect from others. But mere birth and family profession are not the parameters to judge the status of an individual, just as we find in Jim Corbett's "Chamari". Mhadeva constantly argues that there is no difference between lower and upper castes and that they are human beings just like them (169). Babu Patil showed injustice, unkindness and hatred towards them when he refused to give their wages of "a few measures of jowar" (171) in spite of their hard labour at the threshing floor because they were unable to finish their job in time. Yetala's tears does not melt Babu Patil's heart who is not ready to show any kindness or sympathy to the Dalit. Yetala then requests Babu Patil to give him stale bread smeared with dung and urine which the oxen refuse to eat (171-72). These lines symbolically reinforce that the status of these Dalits is much lower than the beast in the society.

Mhadeva convinces Yetala to install an alternative society for Mahars. He suggests that they should learn to live freely and proudly, free from the shackles of land-bondage without being enslaved by lifelong labor (173). He emphasizes the values of liberty, self-confidence and self-respect in order to found a new ideal society. At his deathbed after eating the poisonous bread taken from Babu Patil's house, Yetala advised his grandson to get rid of "the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man" (174). Yetala's last word persuaded Mhadeva so much that he was ready to seek revenge (175). This affirms that Yetala and Mhadeva, regardless of their low-caste origin, have elevated themselves to *Guna* of *Sattva* i.e., purity while Babu Patil belonging to upper caste has been relegated himself to *Guna* of *Tamas* i.e., darkness.

The two short stories may be rightly called modern because the political issues of the-then time, the pertinent questions related to egalitarianism and non-discrimination is here dealt with. Based on propitious values of liberty, equality and fraternity, the society should be of the people, for the people and by the people. The real change will only begin in India when the powerless Dalits find the true value of humanity which facilitates the construction of an egalitarian society without religious injunctions as well as the upper castes' inhumane treatment.

Endnotes

1. Dalit generally refers to the Scheduled Castes who are exploited and oppressed by the rigid caste system in India.
2. The word "Caste" came from Portuguese which meant race, mould or quality. In India, Caste is *Jat* or *Jati*. In Hindu society, each individual has to accept the *Jat* after their birth.
3. A *shloka* is one type of verse line developed in Vedic texts.
4. The Mahars who are posited at the bottom of the hierarchical Hindu social system, usually live in Maharashtra and its neighbouring states.

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